



HE WHO FIGHTS
— WITH —
MONSTERS
BOOK EIGHT



S H I R T A L O O N

— (A.K.A. TRAVIS DEVERELL) —

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MONSTERS

B O O K E I G H T



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BAND OF MISFITS

THE STORM KINGDOM WAS PRIMARILY LOCATED WITHIN THE Sea of Storms, occupying the space between the north and south continents. The kingdom's territory included the coastal regions of those continents, along with the entire body of land that connected them. This strip of land made up the western border, while to the east was open ocean.

The continent to the north was sparsely populated, which was very different to the equivalent region in Jason's home world. The bayous of Louisiana and the wetlands of Florida were nowhere to be seen, leaving rocky barrens as dry as old bones.

The exceptions to this were small pockets of magic that were contained to very specific areas. Jason had encountered examples of this, as they were often the site of fortress towns. By using the local magic conditions, a fortress could employ efficient and powerful defences. Jason had once delivered supplies to a fortress town in a gorge that featured magical scouring winds. The fortress employed those winds to create powerful wind blades that would otherwise have rapidly consumed the town's magical reserves.

Making use of such magical pockets was the specialty of the Irios family, which made the noble house critically important during a monster surge. Jason was unhappy to have been dragged between the Irios family and the royal family, for once through no fault of his own.

Jason was relieved to be well out of the capital of Rimaros, part of an expedition to the arid north coast. Amongst the

barren rock, one of the many canyons in the area was incongruously filled with thick jungle, courtesy of a magical pocket. More typical of other regions of the kingdom, the canyon floor was a dense wall of green, the air humid enough to create a thick haze that hovered over the canopy.

The hot, wet air died the moment it reached the canyon mouth or rose above the sides. That was where the magical pocket ended and the arid surroundings reclaimed primacy. The lush greenery stopped dead, clearly marking the environment within the canyon as magical.

Jason's adventuring team, minus Jason himself, was standing outside the mouth of the canyon. Two other teams were in the nearby area, having been dispatched to clear out a number of monster hotspots.

Before meandering into the jungle canyon alone, Jason had noted that the canyon was quite like the gardens of the Vane estate. There, verdant greenery had likewise sharply met desert in one of the first examples of large-scale magic he had encountered. That had been an artificial situation while this was a natural magical phenomenon.

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

The team was one of three groups operating in close proximity as part of a large-scale monster eradication contract. Such clear-and-sweep operations had become more common following the terrible casualties from the battles with the Builder. In the weeks since the battles, reduced adventurer numbers and the recovery efforts had left too many places unpatrolled. The Builder's forces might have abandoned the Sea of Storms, but the monster surge continued unabated.

A large flying carpet approached, carrying the other two teams from their sweep of the surrounding area. One team was small, being Farrah, Gary and Rufus. The other was a local guild team they were working with. The carpet stopped close to Humphrey and the others, floating over the ground for the passengers to step off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s so tedious,” Neil bemoaned.

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

“Don’t be mean,” Humphrey chided.

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

The rest of the team shook their heads.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” Rosalie said with a grin. “Watch and learn, Remore.”

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

“Everyone has something to contribute,” he said diplomatically. “We all just need to do our best, whatever our approach.”

The three teams all turned their eyes to the jungle. They were all silver-rankers, but the stealthy monsters were neither heard nor sensed before they started gushing out of the canyon mouth. They came in a torrent, the black-furred creatures

blanketing the red earth. The rakells looked like six-legged panthers but smaller, the size of medium dogs. They moved with swift and silent grace, charging towards the line of adventurers.

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

The first things the monsters encountered were traps already set out by Clive and Belinda. Explosions sent chunks of shattered stone and splattered flesh scattering into the air. Those that reached the teams did not have any better of a time and powers swept over them.

Farrah swung her obsidian sword that broke up into segments connected by a stream of lava. Becoming a chain whip of ragged, razor-sharp stone and searing heat, it left a bloody, smouldering wreck of every creature it tore through in ugly fashion.

The members of the guild team were area-attack specialists, which was why they had been chosen as the centrepiece of the clear-and-sweep expedition. Whatever Rufus might have said, no one was under any illusion of competing with the magical carpet-bombing carried out by Rosalie and her team. Ranged attackers like Clive fired from the back while Farrah and Rufus used mid-ranged attacks to stay out of the blast zone.

The more melee-oriented members of the group didn't even bother moving in, lest they be caught up in the sea of destructive power. Their role was to mop up any stragglers that managed to make it through the kill box that was the canyon entrance, which wasn't many.

The rakells were ideally suited to the jungle environment; small, swift and stealthy, their special powers made the most of shadowy confines. But they were small and frail by silver-rank standards, ill-suited to a direct conflict. Exiting the

canyon, the barren rocky ground and open space was the worst environment they could experience, and the adventurers made the most of it.

Despite the conditions, the rakells continued to flood out of the jungle. As time went on, the monsters emerged looking increasingly miserable, even before encountering the adventurers. Their bodies were feeble, slow and marked with ugly rot. More and more moved out of the jungle in terrible condition, with some glowing from within as transcendent light ate them up from the inside.

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

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

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

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

“We don’t have spectacles here,” Farrah called back. “Anyone who can afford them can afford magic.”

Rosalie’s team rode their flying carpet just above ground level as it flew over the flat desert terrain. Without Rufus, Gary and Farrah taking up space, they lounged comfortably, the carpet’s magic shielding them from rushing wind. Jason and Farrah’s teams rode in a pair of large black land skimmers. Rosalie kept throwing glances over at Jason, who was gesturing effusively

as he said something to his team that had them rolling their eyes.

The team had heard various rumours about the man, but he seemed like just another member of what was quickly becoming known as Humphrey Geller's band of misfits. Gellers were known for assembling powerful groups around them, but Team Biscuit was building a reputation for being a cluster of oddities. Only Geller himself seemed normal. There was a pair of thieves, the sarcastic and muscular healer and the magic researcher known for detesting the Magic Society.

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

She hadn't seen Asano in action yet, strictly speaking. He operated in hiding, scouting or herding monsters. More than one group of monsters had unflinchingly charged the cataclysmic powers of her team rather than head back in his direction. She wondered what he had done to spook the monsters so completely. She knew he used afflictions, but even the most excruciating maledictions wouldn't cause that kind of terror.

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

Title: [Giant Slayer]

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

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

Noreth, Jason's sometimes-ally, sometimes enemy, once advised him to make his aura the centerpiece of his adventuring toolkit. While he had never trusted Noreth, he did believe the former familiar's general intentions were good. The man had more than lost his way, however, spending lives by the million to achieve what he believed was necessary. The resolve to make such a grim decision was something Jason feared in himself, with Noreth being another enemy in which Jason saw his own reflection.

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

Jason shook his head to clear it, seeing the concerned looks on his companions as he fell into dark contemplation again. He was back in a world of magic and power now. He had no illusions of being done with the Builder or Purity's minions, but the big picture was the concern of kings and diamond-rankers. Jason had done his part and it was no longer his fight. He'd told himself exactly that over and over, hoping he'd eventually believe it.

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

THE PILE OF DISTURBING THINGS

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

Jason's group of three adventuring teams searched the ruined fortress town for survivors but didn't find a single living aura. It was hard to sense anything at all with the pall of death left behind by so many souls departing their bodies in quick succession. The grim task of checking the dead for survivors hidden amongst them fell to the healers. There were two, Neil and another from the local guild team, Paola. So much death could mask the living aura of a normal-ranker who may be barely alive. Their healing-oriented perception powers would do better than most at digging out any survivors. They also took Jason who had the strongest aura senses of anyone in the three teams. In the unlikely scenario of there being survivors not rooted out by the monsters before they left, the trio had the best chance of finding them.

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

It was a young man on the verge of death; Jason barely detected his waning aura amongst the corpses and the healers used their perception to find the one living body buried under the many dead. Neil and Paola performed a potent ritual that brought the man back from the edge of death, but it also left him comatose. Forcing that much healing magic into the body of a normal person was almost as dangerous as the wounds the magic healed.

Neil and Paola successfully dragged the man from the brink of death without overloading his body, but he would remain unconscious for hours, possibly days. Jason had seen similar recovery times from people who had star seeds extracted from their bodies.

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

“We have a problem,” Neil said after explaining the details around the unconscious survivor. No one else had found one in their searching, but even one from such carnage was a victory.

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

The difference between the physiology of a normal person and an essence user was easy to spot at mid-to-high rank but less pronounced for low-rankers. As healers, Neil and Paola

had the skills, powers and experience to reliably tell the difference, which was one of the reasons they'd been sent to the dormitories.

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

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

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

“We had the same thought,” Paola said. “We did some checking outside of the dormitories and found a couple, by which I mean exactly two. There should have been more, if only some iron-rank civilians with farming or ranching powers.”

Jason let out a frustrated sigh.

“Unless there are a lot more corpses gathered somewhere, they aren't in the fortress. Dead or alive, I would notice a bunch of essence users clustered together unless they're behind something that blocks aura senses. And if something was blocking senses, I should notice the dead spot.”

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

“Why?” Humphrey asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Given the reality he’ll be waking up to,” Rufus said, “that may be a small mercy. If we don’t need to get him to further care immediately, I suggest we go through the whole fortress, top to bottom.”

The other team leaders nodded their agreement.

“Digging through this charnel house won’t be pleasant,” Rufus continued, “but we should be thorough and see if we can’t shed some light on what happened here.”

“Today’s mysteries are tomorrow’s disasters,” Rosalie agreed. “Maybe we can figure out what’s happening before it gets the next town full of people killed.”

“Keep a particular look out for anywhere that has what could be shielding against magical perception. If you find something you think might be that, find Belinda or Clive to take a look. Maybe we’ll find answers or, if we’re extra lucky, more survivors. They could be holed up in a sealed space and not realise we’re here.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re certain?” Rosalie asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arabelle Remore was Rufus’ mother, as well as a member of the Church of the Healer specialising in mental health and trauma recovery. She had worked extensively with Jason to

manage his often tenuous mental state, and had no shortage of other work. The One Day war, when the Builder's fortress cities attacked the Storm Kingdom, had resulted in many adventurer deaths. Part of her job was keeping the survivors active in times that remained hectic and dangerous.

Arabelle took the time to speak with Jason's group in the days after their return, both as a whole and individually. Most of Jason's team had seen massive casualties amongst adventurers before. Many of them had been through the disastrous expedition where Farrah was counted amongst the dead, so witnessing the deaths during the Builder battle was still shocking, but something they could handle.

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

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

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

Overhead, the sun shone from a clear tropical sky, a reflection of the day outside the spirit realm. Through the pair of massive gates forged of dark metal, Clive could see a bridge of shifting rainbow colours extended into the distance. It

moved beyond the light coming from the sky and extended into a dark void, reaching further than even Clive's silver-rank eyes could make out.

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

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

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

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

night sky. Underfoot, more of the grippy wood was set in pathways over the natural stone floor to provide reliable footing.

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

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

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

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

himself he had imagined it only for the movement to once more tease at his eyelid.

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

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

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

CLIVE HAD ALREADY BEEN AWARE THAT IN JASON'S TIME away, his soul had undergone some extreme changes. While he had no knowledge of what a spirit domain was, he understood that something had saturated Jason's cloud house with his presence in a way that Emir's cloud house did not replicate. Jason's spirit realm escalated that feeling drastically. Where the spirit domain was Jason imprinting himself on reality, the spirit realm was a reality forged from Jason himself.

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

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

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

Jason with questions about his latest absurd power, and instead let Jason come to them in his own time.

It was Arabelle that quietly recommended they explore the spirit realm when they had the time. She pointed out that Jason exposing it to the team was an invitation, and a sign that he was close to a much-needed opening up.

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

Clive found himself uncertain as to the exact size of the place, suspecting it to be in a perpetual state of change. He had taken a meandering path that wound back and forth, the looming tower always seeming far off in the distance. Yet the moment he was ready to meet Jason, he found himself stepping into an open pavilion at the tower's base, not entirely sure how he got there.

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

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

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

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

“I don’t understand what that means,” Clive said.

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

“Does that achieve much?” Clive asked. “If you’re feeding magic to your soul to make it stronger, that’s incredible.”

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

“I’d like that,” Clive said. “I’d like that a lot.”

Jason gave him a sympathetic smile.

“How are you doing after what we saw out there?”

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

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

“I feel better for walking around in this place,” Clive said. “Even though there are some worrying corners, it’s calming. Intimate. Is it weird to say that?”

“No,” Jason said with a laugh. “This is about as intimate as it gets. You being you, I assume you’ve figured out where we are right now.”

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

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

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

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

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

Around the two more populated islands were smaller islands that floated in the sky, columns of water rising up from the oceans below like the trunks of trees. The water columns served as elevators, allowing specialised vessels to ride up and through the holes in the islands to surface atop them on the lake or pond each island featured at the centre.

Livaros was the main island of the city, and had been the one that came under attack from the Builder’s flying city fortress. The fortress had damaged a number of the sky islands around Livaros before being taken down. It was now a lopsided ruin that formed a new island just off the shore from Livaros itself.

Jason lived on the least developed island, Arnote. The most similar to its Earth counterpart, Aruba, it was an island of small towns serving the wealthy and elite, for all it looked like a series of sleepy little townships and villages. It was home to retired adventurers, or ones just looking for some peace and quiet, along with merchant barons and even a side branch of the royal family.

Arnote was a place of quiet power while Livaros, home to the Adventure Society and the Royal Sky Island, was a place

of overt power. Jason had yet to visit the third island, Provo, which was the heart of Rimaros trade and commerce, and home to one of the largest sky ports in the world. Most of the airship trade between the continents to the north and south of the Sea of Storms passed through the Provo Port.

For this reason, Provo was a bustling place full of strangers, even during a monster surge. The Builder attacks had left it largely unaffected, relative to conditions already implemented due to the monster surge, and operations had been interrupted for only a couple of days. Regular trade had been largely suspended already, outside of necessary supplies, but the Adventure Society had commandeered the trade fleets to move critical resources.

The west and south mainland had an excellent road network, but it was dangerous without a powerful escort during the surge, and sea travel was worse. Airship travel wasn't exactly safe, but so long as the airships regulated their speed, they could make a journey with only one or two monster attacks. Sky transport required fewer adventurers to escort it compared to other means short of portals, which were largely reserved for responding to urgent monster manifestations.

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

The Purity forces in the Sea of Storms all belonged to the Order of Redeeming Light. The extremist faction's core principle was to purify the unclean and turn them into weapons against that which resisted purgation. Their methods were highly effective for long-term planning and isolated emplacement as they could grow their forces by turning tainted enemies into purified allies. There were flaws to the

methodology, however. In many cases, there were distinctive, tell-tale signs left on the purified that could single them out to those with sufficiently powerful senses.

The result of this flaw meant that with the Purity church under threat of divine sanction, sending the redeemed into populated areas was a risk. As such, Laront, as an ordinary priest who never passed through the flames of purgation, was the only upper-echelon member of the local forces that could safely visit the city. They had a series of low-level infiltrators and informants, but they had no idea with whom they were truly aligned, giving their loyalty only to coin. Such people could not be trusted with the most delicate issues, thus requiring Laront's personal involvement.

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

“You have the information I asked for?” Laront asked.

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

“Does that mean no?”

“It means that I have it, but the price has gone up.”

“We had a deal.”

“One made before we were attacked by flying war cities. With everything going on now, I had to trade some serious favours to get this.”

Laront was confident that Derian wasn't lying about needing to trade favours to get the information. He suspected the difficulty was less about access, though, and more about people not wanting to deal with Derian. The functionary was the kind of man who constantly wondered why all the people

around him were idiots who somehow failed to recognise his superior talent. He couldn't understand why his career stalled when it was obvious how much better things would work if he were in charge.

"This is an information exchange and I already brought all the information you wanted," Laront said. "What else are you after? Money?"

"I want off this island," Derian said. "Who knows when the next Builder attack will come? But they won't let Adventure Society staff quit during a monster surge. They tricked us into signing some heidel-crap agreement when everything was nice and safe."

"You mean the terms of employment?"

"It doesn't matter what it was. The point is, I can't leave the island by any of the normal ways without getting flagged. How was I meant to know the city would get attacked when I signed the stupid thing?"

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

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

"How do you get on and off the island?"

"The normal way," Laront lied. "I don't work for the Adventure Society, so I *can* leave via the normal ways. I can't forge documentation or know who needs to be paid to look the other way. You are the one with the contacts, here. That is the entire basis of this relationship. The best I can do is give you enough money to bribe your way off the island and arrive wherever you choose to go a rich man. How does that sound?"

"You'll just give me a pile of money?"

"Money is easy," Laront said. "Information is my coin of the realm. That makes you more valuable to me than money, so giving you a lot of it is an easy bargain. If the Adventure Society isn't willing to pay you what you are worth, I'll do so myself and thank them for the opportunity."

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

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

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

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

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

“No. Now I get to do it for fun.”

“Now, *my* information?”

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

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

Laront opened the file, glancing over a few pages before putting the file away in another dimensional bag. Derian was already getting to his feet, which Laront didn’t mind. Killing the man in their current location was too traceable, so he would catch up somewhere more discreet.

Derian paused at the door before he left.

“You’re paying for the food, right?”

TAMPERING WITH THAT KIND OF POWER

JASON AND CLIVE MADE THEIR WAY DOWN THE STAIRS IN THE cloud house and into the waterfall room. The natural stone of the cave it occupied was hidden behind walls, floor and ceiling of cloud stuff, which radiated soft, ambient light. Sparkling sunlight streamed in through the waterfall outside the cave entrance that was the only part of the underlying stone that remained visible. The room was empty of furniture, only the staircase in the middle spiralling up into the cloud house through a hole in the ceiling.

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

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

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

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

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

“I had the books from Knowledge, and Dawn gave me a lot of instruction.”

Clive turned from the walls to stare at Jason.

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

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

Clive shook his head.

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

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

Clive nodded sadly.

“Hey, don’t worry,” Jason said. “I may be a tool, but so was Skynet. They might not give you the chance, but I will.”

“What’s a sky net?”

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

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

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

“Isn’t that a horrifically bad thing?”

“Capitalism? Yeah, it’s a shocker. Being rich is super-great, though, which is how capitalism gets away with it. Way more effective than naked Austrian cyborgs.”

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

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

“Yes, I’m definitely finding that out for the first time now,” Clive said dryly, turning back to examine the walls again. “You know, some of this is brilliant. A lot of it needs significant work, but even so. There are some strange flaws, though.”

“Flaws?”

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

“Those values are correct,” Jason said.

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

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

“Where did they come from?”

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

Clive turned around to face Jason again.

“You just know them?”

“Yep.”

“How could you possibly just know that? The only way that could happen would be if, during your time away, you mysteriously gained an intrinsic insight into the underpinnings of physical reality and how it interacts with dimension forces on a cosmic scale at a profoundly fundamental level. Which would be absurd, even for you.”

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

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME?”

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

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

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

“Fat head?” Jason asked, patting his skull to gauge its girth.

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

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

“I have more questions. Significantly more questions.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Or I could leave it there," Neil corrected himself.

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

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

"Frustratingly," Humphrey said. "We aren't going to be a part of the investigation into what happened at the sacked fortress city."

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

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

"This has to be the Church of Purity, right?" Neil said. "They've been running around doing gods-know-what while

the rest of us have been dealing with the Builder and the monsters.”

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

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

“So, they just turn around and betray their kingdom and their people?” Humphrey asked.

“The people in the gutter don’t care about the people in the temples and the palaces,” Sophie said. “Take it from someone who spent a lot of time in one. Kingdoms might do a lot for people like you, Humphrey, but not for people like us. Those people were promised food and safety and got neither. It’s easy to turn on a kingdom that turned on you first.”

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

“If someone shows up and offers them the help they need when they need it most,” Sophie said, “they won’t care where the help comes from. Great astral beings, dark gods. Those are the problems of people like you, Humphrey, and I guess like me now. But not people like them. They want secure walls and full bellies and they don’t care who gives it to them.”

“But we’re not talking about the regular people,” Humphrey argued. “They were victims, not the decision makers. It was the people who should have been protecting them that turned. The ones that are concerned about aristocrats and guilds and temples.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That priority is probably about to change,” Rufus said. “The Builder threat in the Sea of Storms is largely neutralised,

so they're bringing Purity church activity into the Builder response unit's scope of operation, just for the Storm Kingdom."

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

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

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

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

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

"We were talking about the different races of the world because you didn't know about them. I mentioned that humans can sometimes act like they're better than the rest of us."

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

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

"That doesn't sound likely," Jason said.

"They wouldn't have even put up with her," Gary said. "Because she was an elf. Non-human. Unclean. But they had a thing they did. I don't know the details, but it was some ritual. The fire of purification or something. They were taking volunteers and turning them human on the inside. Only elves and celestines, though. The ones that look pretty to humans. There were deaths around that time amongst the leonids that people said were these priests, but I don't know. In the end,

more of what you'd call regular Purity priests showed up and moved them out of town. Looking back, though, it seems a lot like they only showed up once that extremist order had milked the town for all they were going to get."

"And people volunteered for this?" Neil asked.

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

"Great," Jason said with a groan. "Magical pod people. Looking forward to this."

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

"You'll get your chance tomorrow," Humphrey said. "Liara will be briefing us on our next contract."

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

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

"Yeah. I'm not sure that messing about inside your soul is the best idea."

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

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

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

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

“I’m happy to explain the reference.”

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

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

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

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

Clive snorted derision.

“Careful, my throbbing magic wand. Jason, bumping up the power of one of your essence abilities is a bad idea. If it’s operating at a higher level than your soul can handle, it’ll be like a poison or a disease, slowly eating away at you. It would be like the aftermath of eating a spirit coin, except the effects

would last longer and longer each time you used the power until eventually becoming permanent. I've seen the results of experiments like that and it's ugly. There's a reason the people who conduct them get hunted down."

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

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

"I thought of that."

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

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

Clive rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

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

"Enough that I'm willing to try."

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

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

"How rich?"

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

"WHAT?"

YOU DON'T HAVE IT IN YOU

WITH HIS TEAM NEEDING TO ASSEMBLE FOR A CONTRACT MID-morning, Jason set out early to conduct his own affairs. He portalled to Livaros, arriving in one of the squares marked as legal teleport destinations. Another person followed him through before he closed the portal. She left immediately with no more than a nod to Jason, moving quickly. He set out at a more sedate pace, making his way through the streets at a leisurely meander. His destination was Sensual Attire For the Sensual Gentleman, the tailor shop owned by Alejandro Albericci.

Jason had ordered his new wardrobe some time ago, but events had engulfed the whole city and him in particular. He was a long way from the only one affected by service delays and he didn't begrudge the wait. There were plenty of people in desperate need, making Jason's desire for tropics-appropriate casual wear a low priority.

There was a wariness with which Jason made his way towards the tailor shop. He had known for some time that Alejandro had closed the shop to provide support services to the city's relief logistics efforts. It had come as something of a surprise, then, to receive a message informing him that his new wardrobe was ready for collection.

Wary of political machinations or worse, Jason had recruited someone to help feel the place out. While he could certainly have blanketed the area in his aura, he wasn't looking to make a spectacle. Instead, he called on someone whose

senses were even stronger than his own but operated with more finesse than Jason himself.

After arriving through Jason's portal, Estella Warnock had gone off without a word to scout the route to the tailor shop. She had made a career out of being a spy and urban scout in Livaros and knew the island extremely well. Not just the streets but the back alleys, rooftops and building interiors. Between her stealth and disguise powers, she had been inside all but the most secure buildings on the island, and even a few of those.

Livaros was an island of adventurers and aristocrats, one of the centres of global civilisation. Wealth and power had seeped into the streets and buildings over the centuries, which only the ignorant considered a metaphor. Even the essences and awakening stones that manifested on the island trended towards higher-rarity.

All the influence and power made Livaros an incredibly safe place—for a given value of safe. Violence was effectively absent but, in Livaros, war was not a matter of violence. In the upper echelons of society, along with those they used and those who used them, politics was the battlefield and information the weapon. To know the needs, desires and fears of a rival was to have a power over them as great as any essence ability.

Estella had thrived in this environment for a number of reasons. Her power set was an obvious part of that, allowing her to vanish into shadows or hide in plain sight. Most of all, she had the unusual trait of possessing four aura essence powers instead of the usual one. This gave her aura perception and aura strength that outstripped anyone of her rank short of monsters like Jason Asano.

More important than her powers, however, was the ability to temper her ambition. She never took the big risk for the big score, sticking to what she knew and what she was certain

about accomplishing. To play the information game in Livaros was dangerous and she never gambled, knowing that sooner or later, the dice would not go her way.

This was what led to her falling out with Havi Estos. She had done work for the well-known middleman since shortly after reaching iron-rank. She was of little use at that stage, but the potential of her four auras was obvious. Rather than wait for her power to come to fruition, Havi played the long game and invested in her early. Estella had known the reasoning behind his generosity but hadn't minded. He never hid his intentions or sought to exploit her, always dealing straight.

Her time at bronze rank was the strongest point in their relationship. She had become much more useful to him as experience led to growth in power and expertise. She was often useful to spy on silver-rankers, but Havi never pushed her limits, recognising that, as a bronze-ranker, she still needed to be cautious. She avoided the more powerful silver-rankers, only spying on those closer to the start of the rank than the end.

It was after she reached silver rank that things started to go sour. Havi wanted to push her into bolder and bolder moves, but while she had grown in power, Livaros was one of the key global adventuring hubs. While there was no shortage of hopeless silver-rank aristocrats, it was also home to some of the most dangerous people on the planet. Rimaros was the pinnacle of the adventuring world and no adventurer of note was ordinary. Even those that seemed normal had methods that set them apart; to spy on or investigate them was a fraught endeavour.

More than once, Havi sent her to look into the kind of people that she had no business provoking. These were the kinds of people that could make someone like her disappear, even with her grandfather's influence. While the old man still had respect and contacts in the corridors of power, it was only to a degree. The gold-ranker had largely retired and had never been a man of exceptional power or influence.

Much like his granddaughter in her profession, Warwick Warnock had always taken a safe and reliable path in his

adventuring. It had meant that silver and gold rank had taken him longer than most adventurers, but many of his peers had died trying while he climbed the mountain one step at a time. His avoidance of politics meant that while he had the prestige of any gold-ranker; it was no more than that. With Havi pushing Estella towards ever-more-dangerous enemies, one relatively unheard-of gold-ranker was not enough to ensure her safety if things went wrong.

While she didn't regret cutting ties with Havi, it left Estella at something of a loss. While he wasn't the only person she worked for, he was the spider in the middle of the web that was the Livaros underworld. It was a very different kind of underbelly than most cities, requiring a very different approach. Havi wouldn't make things difficult for her, but being on the outs with him made other clients wary. The jobs she was offered swiftly declined both in number and remuneration.

Unsure of what to do, she had finally approached her grandfather, not for help but advice and guidance. The death of her adventurer parents had prompted his retirement to raise her and he had never pushed her to follow in his footsteps, the way he had with his son. Events overcame them, however, as Warwick stepped up in the Storm Kingdom's hour of need. He went north for the grand battle and never returned.

At a loss, she had moved back into her childhood home, the house on Arnote she inherited from her grandfather. She had no friends and few acquaintances, all of which were on Livaros and most of which were avoiding her because of their own need to deal with Havi Estos.

She only really had two acquaintances now, one of which was the mayor of her new home. Pelli was some kind of peripheral royalty who had roped her into helping protect the island, mostly through her grandfather's influence. Estella didn't care about the royal family, being an adventurer or helping people. What she did care about was her grandfather, so when he asked, she agreed.

The other acquaintance was her neighbour, the last person Havi had her investigate. They nodded to one another in

passing and had spoken a few times. Asano hadn't known her grandfather long, but they had gotten along very well.

When Asano engaged her in a professional capacity, she had no reason to refuse. It was the kind of simple job she had done countless times, watching out for some kind of setup to try and push a political agenda, gather information or gather dirt. It had been a little while, so she took her time, being careful and thorough before reporting the all-clear to Asano.

Estella had found Jason and let him know that everything was as it appeared to be, so far as she could determine.

“Thank you,” he told her. “Would you like me to portal you home?”

“I'll stick with you,” she said. “Sometimes a capable schemer will be cautious and wait until someone like me is done before making a move.”

“I appreciate your work ethic,” Jason told her.

They arrived at the front door of Sensual Attire For the Sensual Gentleman where the door was immediately opened by Alejandro Albericci. He graciously ushered them inside. The celestine tailor had his sea-green hair tied up in a top knot and his suit was quite dark. This stood out to Jason as he had learned that the tailor very much preferred to operate in lighter tones.

“Thank you for coming, Mr Asano. And, if I'm not mistaken, you are Miss Estella Warnock?”

“That's right,” Estella said.

“Then please allow me to convey my condolences on the passing of your grandfather. He was a man who knew how to find simple satisfaction in a world full of people ever hungry and never satisfied. I admired him a great deal.”

“You knew my grandfather?”

“He was a customer of mine, of my uncle before me and my great uncle before that. I would not go so far as to claim a friendship, but his was a welcome acquaintance to make. If I may ask, young miss, what brings you to my door today?”

“After my last visit,” Jason said, “I was wary of someone else trying to set up an oh-so-coincidental encounter. I have engaged Miss Warnock to forewarn me.”

“Her reputation in this field is exemplary, so I compliment you on your choice.”

“I was a little surprised to hear from you, Mr Albericci,” Jason said.

“Please, Mr Asano, do call me Al.”

“Alright, Al. I didn’t realise you were still operating.”

“I am not taking new clients,” Alejandro said. “Livaros, for all the turmoil and the terrifying attack, went largely untouched by the recent trouble. Amongst the civilian population and infrastructure anyway. The adventurers have been tragically devastated and again, Miss Warnock, my heartfelt commiseration for your loss. But given that, I have had at least some time and have been working on my existing commissions. They are being completed later than I would like, but completed nonetheless.”

Alejandro had an assistant brew Estella a cup of tea while he took Jason into the workroom for final fitting and adjustments he could make swiftly using his essence abilities.

“For your outfits, I decided to take inspiration from you,” Alejandro explained as he wheeled a mobile rack from a storage room. “You asked for clothes well suited in both function and style to the Sea of Storms and that is where I started. Storm linen, cloud silk, tidal cotton. Flexible, comfortable, breathable. Resistant to the elements, along with the usual magical enhancements. Plus, a selection of hats as requested.”

Alejandro waved a hand in the direction of Jason’s face.

“Your eyes, as I’m sure you’re aware, are very striking. When designing your clothes, I had the choice between

minimising their impact to avoid clashing or to emphasise them for effect. Naturally, I chose emphasis, since why make a coward's choice for a man of courage and prestige."

"I'm not that prestigious," Jason assured him. "I don't know what you've heard, but while I know some prestigious people, I'm not one of them. If that's the reason you took the time to finish my commission, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

"I meet a lot of powerful people in my profession, Mr Asano. For every one of them, the clothes they walk in here with and the clothes they walk out with tell a story. I know what a man who clings to the prestige of others looks like, as well as a man who wishes he had no prestige at all. If I may be so bold, Mr Asano, you think you want to be like Miss Warnock's grandfather, but you never will be. You don't have it in you."

"Is that so?"

"It is, which is why I went ahead and used your remarkable ocular presence as the basis for the emphasis notes in your outfits. Nothing outrageous; your outfits are all in the colours, cuts and fabrics we discussed. I have provided, however, an extensive array of accessories, from cufflinks to handkerchiefs plus hatbands that will draw out the vibrant colours of your eyes."

"I'm not looking for flashy, Mr... Al."

"I am well aware, Mr Asano. As I take you through the outfits, what you will see is dignity and style but with just the right amount of flair. Naturally, should you wish to be less overt, there is a selection of more conservative options as well, although I personally hope they go in a drawer and never come out."

"Alright," Jason said. "I guess you should start taking me through what you've done and we'll see."

"I'm very confident, Mr Asano. And, of course, I have made sure the speciality outfits you requested are all here. Let's start with something simple, however..."

GOOD LUCK FIGHTING EVIL

BEFORE CONVENING FOR THEIR NEXT CONTRACT, JASON'S companions were conducting their own affairs around the city. Neil, as a priest of the Healer, had gone to church. Humphrey and Sophie followed Belinda to browse for items at the trade hall. Belinda's powers had become increasingly item-dependent at silver rank, making her effectiveness scale with the quality of her equipment much more than the average adventurer. As the heart of a major adventuring city, the Livaros markets were perfect for meeting that need, albeit at considerable cost.

Clive went with Farrah to look in on Travis Noble, the accidental refugee from Earth. As a specialist in ordnance that blended technology and magic, he represented new pathways for research to Pallimustus, as the magical bomb that felled the Builder city could attest. He had been holed up in the Magic Society ever since his magical nuclear bomb turned the flying fortress city into an island of ruins.

Clive had once been a rising star of the Magic Society himself, until an unscrupulous member realised his potential, locked him away and attempted to exploit him and take credit for his work. Clive had extricated himself with the aid of Belinda and a sympathetic Magic Society member, but the damage was done. After a wrist-slap response for the person responsible, Clive's opinion of the Magic Society would be hard to bring lower.

Despite his misgivings, Clive did not attempt to stop Travis from working with the Magic Society. He simply

warned him of potential dangers and made sure to check in on him. If nothing else, the Church of Knowledge had taken an interest in Travis, and he was shadowed by the young priestess Gabrielle Pellin. The stern and extremely beautiful young woman, a former lover of Humphrey's, made the young man extremely nervous.

The team met up at the Adventure Society campus, Jason arriving in one of his new outfits. It was a pale blue suit with a white shirt and a Panama-style hat. His shoes, pocket square and hatband all had flares of bolder blue with touches of orange, mirrored in his eyes.

“What are you wearing?” Neil asked.

“It's for when you need to fight monsters *and* dress smart-casual,” Jason explained.

“It's too much,” Neil said.

“Says the man who dressed like his great aunt until Jason came along,” Belinda said.

“I like it,” Humphrey said. “I wish I could wear a cut like that. I don't have the body shape.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, looking at Humphrey and his Middle-Eastern Superman appearance. “You're really hard up.”

They walked across the busy campus grounds until they came to the marshalling yard where they needed to assemble for the contract. There were many of these gathering spots and this one was mostly surrounded by lawn except for the building on one side. They were not the first group to arrive and they wouldn't be the last; they were one of six teams assigned to the expedition. The groups already present were shrouded by privacy screens, which was the norm. High-rankers had sensitive enough hearing that it was harder not to eavesdrop, so privacy screens were commonplace in Livaros. As with restraining auras, in a place where essence users gathered, like the Adventure Society campus, to not use them

was considered rude. Only when silver-rankers were rare, as with the campus in Greenstone, were privacy screens largely unheard of.

Jason's team likewise used their own screen. Humphrey had activated the high-quality device that he carried.

"It's strange that they're putting so many teams on this," Humphrey said, looking around at the groups that arrived before them. "With the Adventure Society shorthanded, it seems a strange time to assign this many people to explore the fallen Builder cities. Surely that can wait until after the monster surge."

"My guess would be they're worried about something buried inside these cities," Jason said. "It's possible that some kind of threat survived the destruction and is waiting to pop out and wreak havoc."

"What kind of threat?" Neil asked.

"Remember the Order of the Reaper's astral space?" Clive asked. "How it turned out to have originally belonged to the Builder and been a city-shaped dimensional vessel designed for invasion? Sound like anything you've seen recently?"

"You're saying it was like the cities that attacked Rimaros?" Humphrey asked.

"Actually, it was larger," Clive said. "You remember how big that place was. If you think of all these cities appearing like a fleet of ships, I think what we saw was a flagship. It had a dozen of those world engineers; diamond-rank golems larger than most buildings. After what happened here, it gives a sense of what would have happened if we hadn't stopped it. The Builder would have started his invasion three years early."

"But we did stop it," Neil said. "I mean, it was mostly you, Clive, but the rest of us were there and we need to tell people about that. Female people."

"Neil," Jason said, "you're a silver-rank elven adventurer who's about sixty percent abdominal muscle. If you're having trouble attracting women, then your flirting techniques must

be catastrophically bad. It's not that hard. Keep your mouth closed, your shirt open and give it about one minute."

"My flirting technique is just fine, thank you very much."

The team all looked at him.

"What?" he asked.

Jason turned his gaze to a closed door in the nearby building.

"I'm going to go talk to Liara," he told the others and headed in that direction, the invisible privacy screen making a faint hum as he left its coverage. As he drew close to the building, Princess Liara Rimaros emerged through the door. The other teams present noted her appearance, but Jason was the only one to approach. Liara tapped a brooch on her chest and an invisible privacy screen shrouded them. Unlike most, this one had a visible distortion effect.

"You noticed me," she said to Jason.

"You let me," he said. "You're not that sloppy."

A smile teased at her lips.

"I saw you talking about world engineers."

"Eavesdropper. I thought Humphrey's privacy screen was pretty good."

"I read your lips."

"Through a wall?"

"Yes."

"That's a little impressive, I guess."

"There's a reason they're called privacy screens and not security screens. They aren't as impermeable as people think, which your new friend Estella could tell you all about."

"Are you keeping tabs on me, Princess?"

"Only to a degree. I can't spare the kind of people who can follow you without you noticing. Something that quite aggravated Vesper, by the way."

They shared a sad smile. Jason had a contentious relationship with Liara's fellow princess, but he had enjoyed their prickly bickering. She had sacrificed herself to make sure the bomb detonated in the heart of the flying builder city.

"I see you finally got that wardrobe change she wanted," Liara said.

"Do you think she'd like it?"

"I do. She liked men in hats."

Liara looked over at Jason's team. Like the groups in the marshalling yard, they were watching Liara and Jason talk within the shimmering screen.

"You were right about why resources are being allocated to exploring the Builder city," Liara said. "We need to make sure the Builder cult didn't leave any unpleasant surprises behind."

"Other expeditions for the other cities?"

Liara nodded. There were two other ruined Builder cities in the Sea of Storms. One was a floating city that had been sunk in a pitched battle with the Storm Kingdom's adventurers, the other was just off the northern coast, a walking city that had moved south. That one had been annihilated single-handedly by Dawn.

"This expedition is going to the fallen city here while a branch further north is exploring the sunken city. The Sea of Storms has no shortage of adventurers specialised in underwater operations."

"The advantage of an adventuring culture built around specialisation," Jason acknowledged. "Always having the right people for the job. What about the city Dawn eliminated?"

"She was too thorough to warrant an operation," Liara said. "We did have it checked out, but it was fast. The whole area of desert is just glass now. The Magic Society is already putting up proposals for possible uses for the area."

"No world engineers hiding away, then."

"I was a little surprised to see your group mention world engineers."

“Really? Hearing that from us shouldn’t be a surprise to someone who took a rummage through my file. Did you just skim read? You were slacking off, weren’t you?”

“I was not slacking off,” she said with an insincere glare as Jason chuckled.

“Did some giant golem show up somewhere?” he asked. “Maybe pop out of a city that had supposedly been destroyed?”

Liara nodded. “That’s exactly what happened. There was a Builder city, less powerful than the ones here because it was in a lower magic zone. The local adventurers took it down, but days later, three world engineers emerged from the ruins.”

“Can diamond-rank golems even operate in a zone with lower magic?”

“It turns out that world engineers get their name from their impact on the world around them. The three of them together operated like a giant mana accumulator, drawing in, refining and redispersing the ambient magic to raise the local magical density. It only works because of the heightened magical saturation from the monster surge.”

“Meaning that they’re built specifically to operate when invading worlds,” Jason said, shaking his head. “The Builder is such a prick. Are the world engineers designed to prime a lower-magic area for attack from the Builder’s stronger forces?”

“That’s our best guess. We know that the Builder cult has yet to deploy its full forces, as demonstrated by the city that appeared to attack Rimaros.”

“It must be a limited reserve, though, or he’d drop half a dozen of the things to make sure.”

“Small mercies,” Liara said. “We don’t think that the cities brought down here have world engineers because they seem specialised for lower magic zones, but we want to make sure we don’t get any other surprises. We’ve confirmed that there are lingering Builder constructs in the ruin of the city, so there’s a reasonable chance of something truly dangerous still

being in there. Your friend's weapon was detonated in the depths of the city, though, so we're hoping it dealt with any hidden dangers buried deep in the ruins."

Even Jason's powerful senses couldn't read the emotions of gold-rank stealth specialist Liara, but her face revealed the anguish her aura did not.

"I'm sorry about Vesper," Jason said softly. "She died as well as anyone could ask for. I liked her."

"I'm sure," Liara said with a sad smile.

"No, really," Jason said. "I'll take smart and sharp over nice and boring every day of the week."

"She liked you too."

"She hated me."

"That was somewhat the same thing with Vesper; she liked a fight. It was the unremarkable she couldn't stand."

"That's pretty elitist."

"You essentially just said the same thing," Liara told him.

"Yeah, but I said it with charm."

She gave him a flat look.

"No?" he asked.

"No."

"I thought I was being charming."

"Most men do, in my experience."

Jason let out a laugh as he looked around the marshalling yard.

"I should probably get back to my team. People are seeing us get chummy and I wouldn't want them thinking I'm the teacher's pet. At some point, we should talk about getting me in a room with the Purity prisoners, though."

"They're important prisoners, Mr Asano, not a festival attraction. I told you from the beginning that I will only use you if I think we can get something useful out of it."

“Princess, I saw the results of whatever Purity is up to.”

“Did you, now?”

“Are you saying it wasn’t the Purity people that wiped out that fortress town we found?”

“Finding it does not make it your responsibility to resolve. You don’t have to be the one to solve every problem, Mr Asano.”

Jason blinked, slightly taken aback.

“I don’t, do I?” he realised. “That’s actually nice to hear. Really nice to hear. Um, good luck fighting evil, then. I’m going to go back to my team.”

“You do realise you’re here because we’re about to explore the ruins of a crashed flying city that is now an island full of constructs sent by an interdimensional invader against whom you specifically are best-suited to combat. An interdimensional invader that hates you personally and specifically.”

Jason shrugged.

“I used to find that kind of thing exciting. Now it’s just Tuesday.”

“What’s Tuesday?”

The island that was once a flying city sat close to the shores of Rimaros. It had already impacted shipping not just with its presence but its effect on water currents around the island. The surface of the city was relatively intact, despite having fallen from the sky after having a magical version of a nuclear weapon detonate deep within it. Relatively intact was not the same as fully intact, however, and there was no mistaking it for an ordinary ruined city.

As the group flew over the water towards it, the first thing they saw was that the flying city had not fallen into the water flat. It was lying at about a twenty-degree angle, putting all the

buildings on a lean. Some had collapsed from a combination of this treatment and battle damage, yet most remained standing, even those that were quite tall.

Each group had their own means to move across the water. Most moved individually on personal transport, like conjured clouds or construct creatures. Jason's team weren't using a Shade vehicle but were instead all inside Clive's rune tortoise familiar, Onslow, as it flew through the air. As of silver rank, Onslow was able to expand his shell to the size of a room. It had no sides, the top and bottom portions of the shell completely separated. The top half of the shell was suspended over the bottom, held in place by magical winds that shrouded the shells and prevented air from rushing into the interior as they flew about. It even kept the inside pleasantly cool under the tropical sun.

As for Onslow himself, he shrank as his shell expanded, taking on a more humanoid form until he looked like a child doing an impressive ninja turtle cosplay. His head was much the same, while his front feet were now three-fingered hands. His shell was no longer on his body and Clive had purchased some children's clothes that his familiar was now wearing.

As Onslow's shell flew across the water with Jason and the team in it, the familiar happily sat sharing a large salad bowl with Clive. Next to the small green figure was what could have been his clone if not for the bushy moustache perched incongruously above its mouth. Humphrey's shape-changing dragon familiar, Velitraxistaasch, liked to take the form of party members, but with a personal twist.

"This is awesome," Jason said, looking around at the inside of Onslow's shell. "It's like being in a bioship."

"This is a more secure vessel than what I can produce," Shade said. "It has much greater structural integrity. Can Onslow access his elemental shell powers in this state?"

Onslow made a chirping noise, his mouth stuffed full of lettuce.

"Is that what a tortoise normally sounds like?" Jason asked.

“Does it matter?” Sophie asked, scratching Onslow behind the head. “He’s a good boy, isn’t he?”

Onslow happily chirped the affirmative.

“He can use his abilities,” Clive said. “This is his only available form, though, and while the speed is adequate for short distances, it’s not ideal for long-distance travel. He can keep up with airships that are slowing themselves down to avoid monster attention during a surge, but that’s his limit. Also, no furniture.”

That aspect left the group either sitting on the warm, soft, leathery floor or standing, looking out at their destination. Fortunately, the floor was quite comfortable, although Jason was sitting in a cloud chair produced by the flask amulet around his neck. As they drew closer to their destination, the team all got up to watch the city grow larger in their vision as they approached.

SPECIAL BOY

JASON'S TEAM ARRIVED WITH THE OTHERS ON THE SHORE OF the island that had once been a flying city. The city was severely damaged, with cracked streets and buildings in various states of repair. Even more noticeable was the cant of the city, which had fallen on a lean of around twenty degrees. The result was a feeling of alienness, like staring at an optical illusion for too long.

The expedition had two gold-rankers. Liara Rimaros was in charge, with Jana Costi as her second. Jana was a member of Liara's team from her pre-gold days, and Jason had met her briefly. She looked very different now, which he knew was due to the absence of her brother. Ledev Costi had sacrificed himself in the bowels of the city in which they now stood. Jana's aura revealed nothing, even to Jason, but her face was filled with barely restrained anger as she listened to Liara brief the expedition.

"We've been over everything before, so I'll just quickly recap," Liara announced. "We know there are active construct creatures on the island and we believe there is a factory producing them somewhere in or below the city. Our primary goal is to discover and shut down this factory, along with any other threats we might find. We will be splitting up into individual teams but remain in contact through a communication power."

Liara gestured to Jason.

"Mr Asano will explain the functions of his ability shortly, but the key point is that you are to ask for assistance when

encountering anything unexpected. Anything. I don't care how easy it seems to handle. I intend to walk away from this expedition with zero casualties. This damn place has taken too damn many of us already and I won't let it take any more."

Before setting out, Liara had already explained that a gold-rank team had already come to the island and cleared out all the construct creatures they found. As far as anyone monitoring the site could tell, whatever was producing more of the constructs was limited to silver-rank creations. The gold-rank constructs already eliminated should have been the last, but should was not a word to rely on.

"We are anticipating one or more clockwork kings to be present in the factory," Liara said. "They are not combat-oriented, but no gold-rank enemy should be underestimated. Under no circumstances whatsoever is any team to enter alone into any location they suspect to be the factory. The expedition will regroup and move together."

The teams split up and moved out while staying relatively close, with the gold-rankers vanishing into stealth. Jason was able to keep track of their location via his map ability since they were connected to him through his party interface ability. As the teams were all silver rank, close wasn't all that close given the speeds at which they could move to reinforce one another.

"This is nostalgic," Jason said as his team moved out. "All of us back together, roaming through the ruins of a weird magic city."

"How about you don't die this time," Neil said.

"Neil, you're such a sweetie," Jason said.

"I just don't want to go back to mediocre food."

"Such a tsundere."

"Shut up," Neil muttered, refusing to meet anyone's gaze as the rest of the team laughed.

"Alright, get your heads into a fight space," Humphrey ordered. "We've been told the constructs have been congregating mostly in the central areas, but keep an eye out

for surprises. Jason, you're our stealth scout, so you move out ahead. Sophie, you're our speed scout, so you take the rear and flanks. Neil, you're our healer, so try not to get stabbed."

"I'll be fine, thank you," Neil said as Sophie moved off in a blur and Jason vanished into the shadows.

"Belinda, keep an eye on Neil," Humphrey said. "Make sure he doesn't get stabbed."

"I'm not going to get stabbed!"

"Don't worry, Neil," Belinda told him. "Your safety is my third priority. Number two is keeping the snacks safe."

"Very funny," Neil said. "Also, doesn't Jason have the snacks?"

"Scout is a dangerous position," Belinda explained. "I've got the backup snacks."

"I'm not feeling deeply valued," Neil said.

"Fine," Belinda complained. "I'll prioritise you over the backup snacks. What did you even put in that box anyway, Jason?"

"Cake sandwiches," Jason answered through team chat.

"As team leader," Humphrey said, "I'm going to have to overrule you, Belinda. If it's cake sandwiches, you absolutely must prioritise them over stopping Neil from getting stabbed. He has to take some responsibility for himself."

"You all realise that a lot of teams are looking for a good healer, right?" Neil asked. "Why don't you ever talk about Clive getting stabbed?"

"Who would stab Clive?" Sophie asked through team chat. "Everyone loves Clive."

"Yeah."

"Agreed."

"Definitely."

"Except his wife."

"Dammit, Jason!"

A construct creature shaped like a two-headed, four-armed ogre stood in front of Humphrey, twice the adventurer's height. It brought four clubs down towards his head, but Humphrey didn't even raise his sword to block. Clive was already casting a spell before the monster started swinging its weapons.

Ability: [Instant Karma] (Karma)

- Spell (spell, affliction, retribution, holy).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (69%).
-
- Effect (iron): The target suffers damage of an amount and type identical to all damage inflicted by the target in the last few moments. This is considered retributive damage. Reducing or negating the original damage does not reduce or negate the retributive damage.
-
- Effect (bronze): You gain an alternative variant of the base spell. The variant spell operates identically to the iron-rank effect except that it changes the damage type of the retributive damage. The new damage type is based on the original, such as heat becoming cold

or disruptive-force becoming resonating-force.
Transcendent damage cannot be affected by this
version of the spell.

- Effect (silver): You gain a pair of additional spells. Each spell inflicts a different version of the short-lived holy affliction [Instant Karma]. An individual may only be subjected to one version of [Instant Karma] at a time but the instantaneous spells from the iron and bronze ranks of this ability can be used on individuals suffering the affliction.
- [Instant Karma] (affliction, retribution, holy): When the target of this ability deals damage they suffer equivalent retributive damage. The damage type of the retributive effect depends on the spell variant used to generate the affliction. Available damage variants: identical to original damage; alternate damage based on original damage type.

When Clive first joined the team, his skills had not been up to the standards of Humphrey, Jason or Neil. Even Sophie quickly outpaced him, her long history of violence helping her adapt very well to the adventuring life. Clive's combat training had been long ago and all but unused for a decade after he gave up adventuring for research.

The last time the team had spent time in a ruined city, honing their skills, it had been Clive and Belinda who had the furthest to go. Both preferred studying magic over methods of killing, although both brought their innovative minds to the more aggressive applications of their power sets.

Clive and Belinda's skills were best at tricky, preparation-based tactics, but that was not the extent of their repertoires. It had been years since Jason pushed Clive back into the adventuring life and he had not been idle with improving himself, becoming more proficient with what, for Clive, passed as simple abilities. While the powers themselves were complex, their use was all about using quick judgement and quick reflexes to seize the moment.

Instant Karma was a power of Clive's that exemplified this. It had long been the power most difficult for him to raise, as he was simply bad at using it. Back when Jason had still been with them, it was a power the team had to make a concerted effort to let him practise. In the time between Jason's departure and return, Clive's dedication to self-improvement and years of adventuring experience had made a stark difference. Now, Instant Karma was one of Clive's most-used powers and he was always on the lookout for the chance to use it to best effect.

Clive's power was not the only one set off in the fleeting moment of the construct swinging its weapons. Humphrey didn't block the attack because he trusted Neil to intervene and, as predicted, a bubble shield appeared around him as the clubs hammered down.

Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution, magic, curse).
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: 20 seconds.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (61%).

- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the blast.
- Effect (silver): Inflicts [Slow Learner] on anyone damaged by the blast.
- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- [Slow Learner] (affliction, curse): Increases all retributive damage suffered by the target.

The shield exploded, blasting away the giant construct. The boost Neil's shield gave to any retribution damage made Clive's effect all the more powerful, and that was not the only such power Clive's karma essence possessed.

Ability: [Mantle of Retribution] (Karmic)

- Spell (boon, retributive).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: 10 seconds.
-
- Current rank: Silver 1 (96%).
-
- Effect (iron): Inflicts retributive impact damage on anyone who attacks the target ally.
-
- Effect (bronze): Increasing the cost to moderate mana allows the mantle of retribution to be bestowed on all nearby allies.
-
- Effect (silver): For a brief period after being attacked, all damage inflicted by the mantle recipient against the entity or object that damaged them is increased.

From the very beginning, Jason's afflictions had been Plan A of the team's strategy against enemies that had small numbers and high individual power. They had never been foolish enough to make it their only plan, however, and they had numerous strategies for such fights. This had proven very important after Jason was lost to them.

One of the key strategies that the team used as their rank increased had started as a supplement to plan Let Jason Do The Damage. They would load up Humphrey and Sophie with protection and enhancement powers and let them switch off

against the opponent. With their powers reaching silver rank, that had become a powerful strategy in its own right, which was valuable given that Jason was no longer with them. Using the synergistic retribution damage that Neil and Clive could place on the team and Sophie could place on herself, they made attacking the team's frontline as unpleasant as being attacked by it.

With the construct thrown backwards by the concussive blast of Neil's shield, Humphrey was leaping through the air before it had time to land. He brought down his massive sword with practised timing, the weapon smashing into the construct just as the construct smashed into the ground.

Humphrey had tailored his equipment towards extending the time he could fight rather than in brief, destructive bursts, like Farrah. Even so, the natural inclination of his power set was dealing a large amount of damage in a small amount of time. While his gear had limited support for this, his abilities did plenty of work on their own. Not only was he stacking multiple passive and active abilities into the attack but also using his doubly-evolved racial gift.

Ability: [Hero's Sacrifice]

- Transfigured from evolved ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon].
- Previous effects of racial ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon] have been lost.

- Sacrifice your health to enhance the power of your special attacks.

At bronze rank, the power had been a significant step down from the ability it replaced. Humphrey's disappointment had disappeared on reaching silver rank. A bronze-ranker had more life force than a normal person, but while the difference was large, it wasn't overwhelming. Making any noticeable sacrifice of that life force was both limited in scope and dangerous in application.

A silver-ranker, by comparison, was a towering titan of life force, a bonfire compared to a match. Humphrey could pour life-force into his attack to generate a massive amount of damage. Best of all, the ability enhanced whatever damage type Humphrey happened to be using.

Ability: [Shield Breaker] (Might)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: Low mana, moderate stamina.
 - Cooldown: 10 seconds.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (79%).
-
- Effect (iron): Inflicts additional resonating-force damage, highly effective against physical defences. Requires a heavy weapon.
-
- Effect (bronze): Damage to rigid material is significantly increased.

- Effect (silver): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the attack.
- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

It was an attack based entirely around resonating-force damage, making it purpose-built for breaking through armour. Builder constructs didn't just have armour; they essentially were armour, making the power all the more effective. Humphrey's attack went off like a shaped charge; an explosion efficiently directing its force exactly where it needed to go.

Even having been hit so hard it left an indent the shape of its body in the ground like a cartoon character, the construct wasn't finished. Despite all the stacked powers and effects, the idea of a single blow taking down a silver-rank anything was pure fantasy. But silver was truly the first step of leaving mortal frailty behind. Humphrey was well aware of this, not pausing for a moment as he stood over the construct he had half-buried in the shattered flagstones of the street. He brought his weapon up and down, up and down, methodical as a railroad linesman. The construct, despite being artificial and not flesh and blood, was so staggered by Humphrey's initial blow that it lay there and took it, not given a chance to pull itself out of the indent it had made in the street.

Ability: [Relentless Assault] (Might)

- Special attack (magic, dispel).
- Cost: Low stamina, increasing with each successive attack.

- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Silver 2 (08%).
- Effect (iron): Each use of this attack in quick succession increases the damage of this attack. Damage is of the same type caused by a normal attack.
- Effect (bronze): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating resonating-force damage is dealt with each attack.
- Effect (silver): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating disruptive-force damage is dealt with each attack and one instance of a boon is dispelled from the target. Subsequent attacks dispel an escalating number of instances.

Relentless Assault was an ability that had been of little use at lower ranks, with most enemies falling to Humphrey's destructive power very quickly. At silver rank, it showed its value, letting him topple giants like a woodsman felling trees. The cost of the ability escalated drastically if he used it for long enough, but that was where Humphrey's choice to build his gear for endurance proved itself. He could continue to hack away while his items and the abilities of his team continually

replenished him when the cost of maintaining the attack would otherwise be exhausting.

As Humphrey hacked away, Sophie had tied up the other large construct and Jason's afflictions were now eating away at it. Neil was drawing out a ritual circle in golden light, ready to heal Humphrey, who had burned through a good amount of life force.

Ability: [Grand Renewal] (Renewal)

- Spell (healing, ritual).
 - Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 1 hour.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (38%).
-
- Effect (iron): Conduct a powerful healing ritual that cleanses all non-wound afflictions. This ability takes the place of the ritual's material components.
-
- Effect (bronze): The ritual circle is magically drawn, allowing the ritual to be more quickly enacted and in less ideal conditions.
-
- Effect (silver): Multiple people can be healed in a single ritual, splitting the healing strength between

them. The healing provided by this ability has a greater than normal effect at eliminating wound afflictions.

Neil's strongest single-target healing power was a ritual-fuelled ability that was difficult to use in combat, but just the thing for restoring Humphrey's expended life force. Neil wasted no time, knowing that the team needed to be ready should something else turn up to attack them.

"We need more to show up," Belinda complained. "All I got to do this fight was stand here and make sure no one stabbed Neil."

"Yeah," Belinda agreed, scratching at her moustache.

The team only took a short break in the wake of the fight. Humphrey, fresh from being healed up, flew to where Jason stood atop a half-ruined tower, watching the approaches to their resting spot.

"You look troubled," Humphrey said. "Surely a few constructs don't bother you."

"That's the problem," Jason said. "It feels like the Builder is iterating his construct designs to counter my ability to affect them. Back in Greenstone, I was able to lock down star seeds so that, even without my intervention, they'd stay locked long enough for the Magic Society to work up something to keep them suppressed."

"It's not the same now?"

"No. The cultists I encountered not long before you and the team arrived were much harder to keep bundled up. It was like holding a greased-up river stone; it could easily have slipped out of my grip. The constructs at that time were easy enough to make clumsy, but the ones here were more resistant."

“You think the Builder is changing them to stop you?”

“I think he’s updating his minions each time he sees me affect them, yeah. It’s probably not hard. For the star seeds, it would be like a firmware update.”

“A what?”

“Sorry. I mean that the Builder can probably change them easily and remotely. My guess would be that it’s harder with the constructs since the cultists have star seeds with direct connections to the Builder. He probably can’t change the constructs that have been already built, but most likely, we’re dealing with newly crafted ones here. I imagine he updates the designs through those clockwork kings.”

“Just to be clear, then,” Humphrey said. “You’re up here brooding because you’re worried you won’t be the special boy who can single-handedly take on whole armies of Builder constructs?”

“Not exactly,” Jason said. “I could probably take on an army of them with just my regular powers if I’m being honest.”

Humphrey gave Jason a flat look and opened the voice chat to the team.

“I’ve made a decision as team leader,” he announced. “We are now letting Jason get stabbed.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason complained. “That’s hardly—”

Humphrey grabbed the front of Jason’s combat robes and threw him off the tower.

STRICTLY NECESSARY

“THERE’S SOMETHING ODD ABOUT THIS CITY,” HUMPHREY said, prompting the rest of the team to give him a confused look. Even Sophie stuck her head over the edge of the roof she stood on to look his way.

“Um, yes,” Clive said. “I may have spotted the occasional architectural eccentricity myself.”

“Just to be clear,” Neil said, “you think there might be something odd about the city that is really a giant dimension-hopping ship that fell out of the sky, is tilted at an angle, smashed all to crap and host to an ever-growing army of automatons attempting to pluck whole chunks off the side of the world.”

“I think you might be onto something there, Hump,” Jason said.

“You’re looking, but not seeing,” Humphrey told them. “Listen to what Neil described. What you see is all the strangeness that Neil mentioned but that isn’t actually strange. That’s exactly what you’d expect from a crashed interdimensional invasion ship and that’s how you’re all looking at this place. But try looking at it as a city. A ruined, off-kilter city, but a city.”

Jason emerged from a nearby shadow, his expression curious as Humphrey piqued his interest.

“What are you seeing that the rest of us aren’t?” Jason asked him.

“It was something that occurred to me when we were fighting here during the battle,” Humphrey said. “Back then, it was too hectic to give any real thought to.”

“Compared to this trip, which has been nice and relaxed,” Neil pointed out.

“I’ve been to a lot of cities across the world,” Humphrey said. “I was raised in Greenstone, but my mother has been travelling with my sister and me since we were small. She wanted us to see other places and other cultures. Different cities have different feels to them, but there’s always a sense of being a place where people live. It might be indulgent, hedonistic, practical, industrial, authoritarian, but there’s always a sense of people and purpose to them. The city speaks to who they are, what they do and what they value. They feel lived in.”

“I think I get what he’s talking about,” Neil said, looking around. “This place doesn’t feel like the ruins of somewhere people used to live. It feels empty. Hollow. Like a shell.”

“That makes sense,” Belinda said. “The true purpose of this place isn’t the city. It’s a façade for the true operations that were underground.”

“No,” Jason said. “I don’t think it’s that simple. Who would the façade be for? The Builder and his people only do things for the Builder himself. This city is for him.”

“What do you mean?” Clive asked. “It’s not like he can come here and live in it.”

“You’re thinking on the wrong scale,” Jason said. “To us, this place is vast, but to the Builder, that size is nothing.”

“What are you saying?” Sophie asked, lightly dropping from the roof.

“This place is a toy,” Jason said. “It’s not a real city; it’s a one-to-one scale model built by someone who doesn’t understand people.”

Like everything else in the ruined Builder city, the towers were on a lean. Belinda, clad in sleek and supple leather, slid down the near-vertical wall, balanced on her feet and gathered speed. The surface of the tower was uneven brickwork but her magical boots smoothed her descent. Under the soles of her boots, magic shimmered like a heat haze, ignoring any ridges or bumps and giving her a clean slide. All she needed to worry about was balance.

By the time she came within a few storeys of the ground, she had built up a good amount of speed. Combining that with her silver-rank strength, she launched herself from the wall in a massive leap, over the street below and toward a building across the way. Turning adroitly in the air, she landed on another wall, leveraging her momentum to run along it.

Ability: [Instant Adept] (Adept)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: Very high mana.
 - Cooldown: 6 hours.
-
- Current rank: Silver 1 (74%).
-
- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Speed] attribute and temporary proficiency with acrobatics, small blades and ranged weapons. Your maximum stamina increases and you gain an ongoing stamina recovery effect.

- Effect (bronze): Gain supernatural movement powers including wall-running and water-walking.
- Effect (silver): Gain additional special attacks and abilities based on equipped weapons, armour and utility tools.

From the air above came a sound like a bomb dropping as a high-pitched noise got lower as something descended from overhead.

As Belinda ran along the second wall, nearing the corner, she slapped a hand on it, magically adhering the end of a rope that trailed from her sleeve. She leapt from that wall as well, using the rope to swing around the corner of the building. The street below was thick with Builder constructs similar to centaurs but with lower bodies like ants instead of heidels.

The rope released from the wall and snaked back into Belinda's sleeve, tossing her out over the constructs. She tumbled gracefully through the air to perform a superhero landing, right in their midst, both hands landing flat on the flagstone street. She lifted her hands, under each one conjuring a rod, affixed to the ground. One rod was crystal and the other iron.

Ability: [Force Tether] (Trap)

- Conjunction.
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (19%).
- Effect (iron): Conjures a crystal rod, from which a tether of shimmering force connects to all nearby enemies within a moderate range. Tethered enemies are dragged towards the rod, which is protected by a force field that inflicts moderate resonating-force damage to anyone in contact with it. If the force field is ruptured, it explodes in a wave of resonating-force damage. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then it explodes in a wave of disruptive-force damage. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether. Untethered enemies who enter within range of the rod become tethered. Only one force tether rod may exist at a time.
- Effect (bronze): Strength and pulling force of the tether is increased.
- Effect (silver): Inflicts [Inescapable]. Moving or being moved against the pull of the tether causes the tether to inflict resonating-force damage, escalating with distance from the rod.
- [Inescapable] (affliction, magic): Target cannot be affected by teleport or non-hostile dimension effects.

The crystal rod shot tethers of barely visible force at all the surrounding enemies. The tethers immediately started dragging the clustered crowd of constructs, which strongly resisted the pull. At the same time, lightning arced from the iron rod in a continuous stream of electricity that jumped from one enemy to the next, connecting them in a chain.

Ability: [Lightning Tether] (Trap)

- Conjuration.
 - Cost: Low mana-per-second.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (21%).
-
- Effect (iron): Conjures an iron rod, from which a tether connects to the nearest enemy within a short range. If no enemy is in range, it will attach to the first enemy that enters range. The tether deals a negligible amount of ongoing electricity damage that scales upward based on the length of the tether. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then a stroke of lightning strikes the nearest enemy before chaining from one enemy to the next until all enemies in the vicinity have been struck. The lightning triggered by the destruction of the rod deals heavy electrical damage and inflicts the [Stunned] condition. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether, which attaches to the enemy closest to the rod, if in range. Only one lightning tether rod may exist at a time.

- Effect (bronze): Secondary tethers chain from the initial target to a second nearby enemy and from that enemy to a third. Damage to each target is based on the length of each tether to which they are connected.
- Effect (silver): The tether can chain to as many as seven enemies. If tethered enemies are close together, each short tether emits electrical projectile attacks at random non-tethered enemies.
- [Stunned] (affliction, lightning): Target is incapable of taking physical action for a brief moment.

The lightning tethers were all short, being tied to the close-in constructs, and immediately started firing electrical projectiles. They inflicted minimal damage on the constructs but appeared to affect their motor functions.

It was at that moment that the sound of the descending object culminated in Sophie landing right next to Belinda in an identical pose.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (91%).
- Effect (iron): Effect (Iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.
- Effect (bronze): Can affect magical projectiles and some magical area effects.
- Effect (silver): For a high mana cost, create a wave of wind with extremely powerful pushing force that blasts out in a circle from the ability user. The wind wave can affect or not affect anyone or anything it passes over, as desired. The strength of the wave can be amplified by dropping from a high altitude, with the level of increase affected by the speed and distance of the drop. User suffers no damage from ground impacts using the ability in this way.

The entire crowd of constructs was blasted away as if a bomb had gone off. Some slammed into the building Belinda had just jumped from while others were tossed into the empty canal on the other side of the street. Most were thrown up or down the roadway, hurtling a huge distance.

The damage from Belinda's tether rods took effect, the distance from the rods escalating the repercussions. The

lightning rod's damage continued to be minimal in terms of harming the constructs, but the more the effect grew, the more their functions were impeded. As for the crystal rod tethers, the resonating-force damage was devastating to the rigid constructs.

The constructs were now scattered over a wide area, blue and orange butterflies landing prettily on their fallen forms. The force tether's pull kicked in and the constructs were swiftly dragged back to where Sophie and Belinda were just standing up. Wind kicked up around them, carrying them both into the air and out of the path of the converging constructs. Belinda looked down to where the drag of the force tethers was literally piling the constructs on top of the small force field around it. She pointed her open palm at the ground, right where the tether rods were.

A pit—not an actual hole but an open dimensional space filled with darkness—appeared under the rods. The rods fell into the dark, along with the pile of constructs. This triggered the detonation conditions for both rods, the lightning chaining through the pit full of enemies. Much more destructive was the explosion of resonating-force damage, contained within the space of the pit.

Outside of the pit were more constructs the tethers hadn't dragged into range before Belinda conjured the pit. Dark tentacles emerged from the dimensional space, grabbing at the constructs and pulling them in as well.

Ability: [Pit of the Reaper] (Trap)

- Conjunction (dimension).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 2 minutes.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a dimensional space pit on any horizontal surface. The surface does not need to be solid or supportive. Anyone inside the pit suffers ongoing necrotic damage. If this spell is cast again while a pit already exists, the existing pit vanishes, depositing anyone inside upon the surface on which the pit was conjured.
- Effect (bronze): The ability user and their allies may stand on the pit without falling in if desired.
- Effect (silver): Shadow tentacles drag enemies into the pit.

The necrotic damage of the pit would generally not affect the constructs, but Jason's afflictions, spread by Gordon's butterflies, changed that. The butterflies even followed the constructs into the dark, themselves unaffected by necrosis.

Belinda and Sophie landed on a nearby rooftop where Humphrey, Neil and Clive were already watching from the high vantage. Jason rose from Humphrey's shadow like he was riding an elevator.

"Was all that jumping around strictly necessary?" Neil asked.

"Sorry, what's your mobility power again?" Belinda asked him. "Oh right: asking people to carry you places."

"My mobility power is Take Me Somewhere Or See How It Goes The Next Time Your Arm Needs To Be Healed Back On."

“That was one time,” Belinda said.

Neil gave her a flat look.

“The second time didn’t count,” she said. “Half of it was still attached. At least a third.”

Liara opened a voice channel using Jason’s party interface to speak to the entire expedition.

“All teams need to regroup. I’ve been contacted by the scouts monitoring the island and several large, unknown forces have approached in underwater vessels and made landfall at points around the island. Pallav, send up your signal flare and all teams converge on that point.”

“What do you think?” Neil asked. “Builder forces looking to retake the island?”

“There’s no way they can take and hold an island this close to Rimaros,” Clive said. “Trying would be insane.”

“It’s an army of idiots who swap their arms out for logs or whatever to serve some interdimensional idiot in a feud with Jason,” Neil said. “No one accused them of being sane.”

“There’s little point speculating without more information,” Humphrey said. “Let’s get moving.”

OPPORTUNISTS

THE ORDER OF REDEEMING LIGHT HAD LONG TRAVELLED using underwater vehicles that were neither fast nor efficient but were very hard to detect. As such, they were able to avoid being spotted by the scouts watching the Builder island until they had almost arrived, their vessels surfacing shortly before beaching against the crumbling stonework shore. The vehicles looked like large, flat whales of green metal.

One of the vehicles pushed up against a point where the canted angle of the city had raised the ground level to several metres into the air. A massive hole smashed in the exterior had produced a rough ramp of rubble on which the vehicle beached itself.

Only a few of the people from each boat were members of the order. The majority of the passengers were magically controlled slaves, the pure servitors. Pure servitors were essence users that had been implanted with clockwork cores, like the converted the Builder cult made use of. The difference was that the clockwork cores implanted in the pure servitors had been, to the Order of Redeeming Light's standards, cleansed.

The core principle of the order was to take that which was unclean, purify it, and turn it into a weapon. Clockwork cores came from clockwork kings, which were one of the most important assets the Builder provided his cult. After putting one of the kings through the order's rituals of purification, the cores it produced were fundamentally different.

Clockwork cores converted essence users by altering and taking over their bodies. As the cores could not violate the soul, which was the seat of a person's magic, the converted were unable to use their essence abilities. Instead, the cores warped the bodies of the converted in ways sometimes obvious and sometimes not.

Pure servitor was the name the Order of Redeeming Light gave to its own converted, made through modified cores. The results were very different to that produced by normal Builder cores, but the process still produced obedient slaves for whom the only escape was death.

While the Adventure Society had been busy dealing with the monster surge and the Builder invasion, the order had been luring people in isolated fortress towns into accepting cores. If they weren't isolated, it wasn't that hard to make it so they were, and if they couldn't be talked around, there were other options. Core implantation went better when people were tricked into accepting it, but it wasn't strictly necessary. The success of this 'recruitment' process meant that the order was in need of more cores than their single purified clockwork king was able to produce.

The front of the submersible opened up and three Order of Redeeming Light members led out a large group of pure converted. The slope made up of scree and shattered chunks of wall made for unsound footing, but silver-rank balance and reflexes made it little challenge.

The three order members, Sendira, Fila and Ramona, were all women. They were also human, although Ramona had once been a celestine. Her previously gold hair was now sunshine blonde and her once-golden eyes were now blue. The trio gracefully made their way up the slope in single file, the pure servitors clambering after them.

"This entire operation is reckless," said Fila, who was in the middle of the three. "There are gold-rankers here. Stealth specialists, no less. They could be anywhere."

"Then maybe shut up before they hear you complaining," said Ramona, bringing up the rear.

“Both of you be quiet,” Sendira ordered from the front. “Distraction and frivolity taint pure dedication of purpose.”

Sendira was not just the overall commander of the island raid but also the second-in-command of all the order’s forces in the Sea of Storms. Sendira did not deign to look back while delivering her admonishment as the other two shared a glance. All three were from different cells of the order, but the pair had found a swift camaraderie working under Sendira.

The Order of the Redeeming Light had operated using a cellular organisation long before the Church of Purity fell. As one of the church’s most extreme wings, they had always been prepared to face religious persecution. Always ready to be disavowed by their parent church from necessity, they had been well-placed to endure the church’s downfall. As a result of their cellular structure, the order’s operations in the Sea of Storms had an overall command structure, but each unit had its own leadership. This sometimes led to friction when cells worked together.

Melody Jain was the overall leader of the order’s local operations, along with her second, Sendira, and church advisor, Laront. As the overall leadership was the same silver rank as the individual cell leaders, there was a constant tension between them.

“You think we don’t know why we were assigned with you specifically?” Ramona said to Sendira. “You don’t want us interfering with your real objective.”

“You might be telling us we’re here for the clockwork kings,” Fila added, “but we know that is just an afterthought. You only found out about the clockworks kings while setting up to kidnap Melody’s daughter. Melody is using the presence of the kings as a pretence to expend the order’s resources for her own ends.”

“You picked us for your group because you don’t want our commanders realising that Melody is using the order for herself instead of its true purpose,” Ramona added. “While you’re keeping an eye on us, Melody’s blind little devotees can do the things she doesn’t want us to see.”

“Only Purity is worthy of our devotion, not his servants,” Sendira told them. “We are all unworthy, seeking to cleanse the taint that lingers within us and keep ourselves from accruing more. To speak in ignorance and disobedience, both of which make you lesser, is to invite an uncleanness of spirit into yourself. Your only concern here should be purity of purpose. Do as you are told and you shall lift yourselves in the eyes of the god.”

“You talk down to us as if you were a gold-ranker, Sendira, but you’re not,” Ramona told her. “You’re just someone who takes being holier-than-thou a little too literally.”

The wing of the Order of Redeeming Light in the Sea of Storms didn’t have any gold-rankers amongst them—they didn’t want to draw the kind of attention that gold-rankers inevitably brought. Even the most mundane of gold-rankers was the kind of potential threat to stability that people liked to keep track of, especially if those gold-rankers were operating outside of the Adventure Society.

It made sense, then, for the order to avoid having gold-rankers in their number when the goal was to operate without grabbing attention. Long before the fall of the Purity church, the Storm Kingdom had been aware of the Order of Redeeming Light’s presence. Even with legitimate churches, their more extreme factions were worth paying attention to, but the local powers had remained unconcerned so long as the order had no one higher than silver rank. When local authorities came looking for them, the order’s losses were minimal; their discretion allowed them to enact preparations made while they had gone long-overlooked. The absence of gold-rankers had been a better shield than having gold-rankers to defend them would have been.

Despite all this being true, many of the order’s membership continued to object to the absence of gold-rankers within their number. The leadership in other cells, being of no lower rank than Melody, had been a source of friction within the order. Respect for rank was ingrained across the cultures and religions of Pallimustus and many felt that Melody’s

resistance to a gold-rank presence was to avoid giving up power.

The trio reached the top of the rubble, passed through the hole in the wall and arrived on a sloping street, the flagstones cracked and pitted. Sendira finally turned to face the other two.

“Your only thoughts should be on the task you have been given,” she admonished. “The disposition of the kidnap target is unrelated to your objectives. You do not understand what is in play or have any need to concern yourselves with her. Put any consideration of her aside and concentrate on the tasks you were given, not those given to others.”

Fila and Ramona glowered but remained silent. They were angry but patient, knowing that Melody’s poor choices would ultimately build the gallows for them. Attempting to kidnap a silver-rank adventurer from Rimaros, with the city’s heightened state of awareness and frenzy of adventurer activity, was a foolish endeavour. That was why Melody had Laront seeking out information so that they could grab her while she was out on a contract.

The first opportunity to grab the target had been the Adventure Society expedition to the island, which Melody had already rejected. It was close to Rimaros, there were multiple teams and a pair of gold-rankers. The realisation that there were clockwork kings on the island had changed the value proposition, however, pushing Melody into action. This choice was not sitting well with many of her rivals.

“Once this operation is over,” Fila said, “everyone will see that Melody is advancing her personal agenda and risking the order’s assets, people and goals to do it. We’ll see how arrogant you are then, Sendira.”

“Yes,” Sendira told them. “We will. Now, organise the pure servitors. The adventurers will scout us out before acting and we need to move before they make an active response to our arrival.”

The vast majority of the forces the order brought to the island were the pure servitors, implanted with purified cores.

This was a reflection of the new disposition of the order's overall forces. True members of the order had all been purified in the fire of purgation, cleansing them of impurities, but the purifying flames were a limited and precious resource. They were not a feasible path to building the forces required for the war to come.

The solution came from an uneasy alliance with the Builder. The Builder was clearly an unclean and invasive presence, but there were two mitigating factors. One was that the Builder would only be present for a short time. Once he was gone, the remnants of his presence could be eliminated. The other was that the greatest advantage the Builder had was the power to rapidly assemble a large and obedient force.

When the Order of Redeeming Light had established a branch in the Sea of Storms, it was specifically to explore the viability of a purified clockwork king. The core of the program was a clockwork king that the Builder agreed to hand over to the church as part of a larger series of deals and concessions. The order subjected the automaton to the fire of purgation, wiping away the Builder's influence and claiming the entity for Purity. As a result, the clockwork king no longer produced the clockwork cores it once had. Instead, it became a source of the purified cores the order had been using on the essence users of the fortress towns they suborned.

The order regretted that the purified cores were not as ideal a process of transfiguration as the fire of purgation, but what could compare to the power of the most pure and perfect god? The cores engendered a transformation in those that accepted them, which was ideal, or had them forcibly implanted, which was not. Forcible implantation often led to unfortunate, but not insurmountable, behavioural problems.

Forcibly implanted or not, the process rendered essences unusable, replacing their powers with lesser and not entirely predictable alternatives. These were weaker and less numerous than essence abilities, but the implantation process raised the person implanted an entire rank. Given that the cores were generally used on garbage essence users, there was a net gain in power. The greatest regret the order had about the process

was that, unlike the fire of purgation, the cores failed to purge the inhumanity of the tainted races.

The cores, however, were essential for the war to come. The church needed to replicate the Builder cult's power to rapidly build up its forces, even if those forces weren't ideal. So long as their troops were plentiful, pure and obedient, that was all that mattered. The cores commanded the absolute obedience of those in whom they were implanted, which was not something the order mentioned to volunteers.

The order had been infiltrating fortress towns while Rimaros neglected them. If the city wasn't neglecting them, the order made sure it felt like they were until the town's defenders were desperate enough to accept the order's overtures. Melody was exceptional at getting whole towns to take cores voluntarily, while other cells had mixed success.

Purity followers were famous for being exclusionary and judgemental, which was not an ideal attitude for winning people over. The current status of the church only made the challenge greater. When the essence users of a targeted town remained resistant to accepting cores, there was the other approach. Forcible implantation was less desirable, but remained acceptable.

The Builder cities attacking had been the perfect chance for the order to move openly on a number of their targeted towns. Volunteer essence users were brought away while more reluctant towns were forcibly converted. Only those who died fighting instead of being taken alive were left behind. Either way, the civilians were massacred and the whole thing was disguised as monsters overrunning towns left vulnerable by adventurers too busy to support them.

The Adventure Society, being massively understaffed, had taken weeks to uncover the truth of what was happening. They were only just starting to realise that something more organised and sinister was happening to the fortress towns, although the culprits were obvious. The Purity loyalists had already been identified as meddling in the region.

Now that the local powers were catching on to the order's activities, Melody had chosen to be more overt. She was willing to be more open using the assets the order had built up before the Adventure Society grasped the extent of what they were dealing with. This had been the impetus for having cells collaborate, moving in numbers, showing off their stealthy submarine transports and using the pure servitors to raid the island.

Having used the essence users of fortress towns as a large-scale test of the purity cores, the next step was to establish an infrastructure where what they had accomplished could be scaled up and spread beyond the Sea of Storms.

For that to be possible, the order needed more clockwork kings. Not only did they need to increase the production of pure cores but also have redundancies should any of them be lost to enemy action. As the Builder was unwilling to surrender more of the kings, the order would need to take them for themselves. The news of one or more kings being present on the island was an important opportunity, but acting at the same time as an Adventure Society expedition was a massive risk.

If clockwork kings were on the table, they became the priority; the chance to grab their original target was reduced to a welcome, but secondary, objective. The opportunity to accomplish both made raiding the island a significantly more worthwhile expenditure of resources. The Adventure Society would soon have a better understanding of the order's activities and capabilities, so revealing them now was a minimal loss. The chance to use the pure servitors en masse before the Storm Kingdom and the Adventure Society knew about them was not an opportunity that would last forever.

That was what finally drove Melody's decision to rapidly plan and execute the raid, even if the rush lent to unexpected variables. The pure servitors were always intended as disposable forces and there would not be a better opportunity to use them. This was what led to Sendira watching on as Fila and Ramona directed the pure servants off the boat to clamber up the rubble slope.

The pure servitors were a mix of ranks. Iron-rank essence users had become bronze when implanted with cores, while bronze had become silver and the silvers, gold. They were only equivalent to weak monsters of their rank but the gold-rank servitors were still a trump card that could well be the difference against the gold-rankers on the island. As such, each of the five landing parties had two gold servitors, representing a major portion of the order's overall strength.

“Melody is going to pay for wasting this many gold-rank servitors on snatching up her daughter,” Ramona told Sendira.

“Even if we succeed,” Fila added, “we’re going to lose most of them. Maybe all. Is Melody ready to accept responsibility for that?”

“Melody is fully prepared to bear the responsibility for this operation,” Sendira told them, unperturbed. “Her courage is pure. Can the opportunists you follow say the same?”

A BLAND KIND OF ALCHEMY

ON THE RUINED ISLAND CITY THAT WAS ONCE A FLYING Builder fortress, the adventurer expedition Jason and his team were part of regrouped. With multiple forces of Purity troops arriving on the island, the expedition commander, Liara, was changing their approach. As her primary concern was the safety of her people over the swift elimination of the enemy, she chose two basic doctrines for their response to the arrival of the Purity forces: simplicity and safety in numbers.

Avoiding any attempt at elaborate strategy, Liara decided on a simple and efficient approach. With unknown variables at play, she didn't want to introduce anything else to go wrong. The teams would go out directly to engage the enemy. As for numbers, she paired the teams up rather than let the six groups keep operating individually. That left only three groups compared to the five Purity landing parties that arrived on the island, but Liara would rather take her time and lower the risk to her people. She strongly considered only two groups, but there was only so much she was willing to let the Purity forces run around unchecked.

The teams were matched up to complement each other, so the other team with an affliction specialist was not paired with Jason's. She was a classic affliction specialist with an entire team dedicated to facilitating her powers. That group was paired with the most defence-oriented team of the expedition to further secure the affliction specialist. As for Jason's team, they were placed with a team built around reliability and efficiency.

They were much more of a generalist team than was the norm for Rimaros, but the local adventurer doctrine shaped them heavily nonetheless. Jason and Humphrey had been trained in the Vitesse style that valued a diversity of power while what passed for an acceptable generalist team in the Storm Kingdom was heavy on uniformity. Their team name was Work Saw, although Jason was uncertain why. None of them had any saw-related powers.

The two teams got the chance to see one another in action as they made their way through the city, clearing a path through the constructs they encountered. Team Work Saw's two front-liners had power sets that placed them in the same brawler role as Humphrey. As for the ranged attackers, they were all about clean, simple attacks. One was an elf with no stand-out abilities but basic damage spells in every flavour there was. The other was an archer who specialised in firing arrows and that grew larger mid-flight. Rounding out Team Work Saw were a defensive specialist and a healer, both in the classic mould.

The power sets for Team Work Saw's ranged attackers were simple, clean and effective. Comparing them to that of their Team Biscuit counterpart, Clive, was an encapsulation of the difference between the teams. Work Saw was all about simple, fundamental powers that were useful in almost any situation, while Clive's core tactics were built around preparation and sophistication. Team Biscuit's complexity hurt them with simple tasks but gave them the tools to handle unconventional circumstances.

Every adventurer who filled classic roles like ranged attacker, defender or healer had fundamental powers that fell within generic archetypes. These were the bread and butter of such power sets—simple, efficient and reliable. Humphrey and Neil, the most traditional members of Jason's team, had an ample selection of such abilities to go with their more unconventional powers.

The rest of Jason's team had more exotic abilities, to varying degrees. Jason, Sophie and Clive were each unusual variants of afflictions specialist, defender and ranged attacker

respectively. As for Belinda, she was something truly unusual, which, in many ways, made her the quintessential member of the team. All four were grab bags of strange abilities that required some combination of skill and judgement to leverage effectively.

This was the opposite of the Rimaros team. They didn't just possess a selection of the foundational techniques that were the hallmark of their roles; their entire power sets were built around them. This meant that, individually, they were not just unexciting but outright mediocre. They had no big finishers to close out a fight or seize the momentum in a critical moment.

Whoever had put the team together had either possessed formidable foresight or got lucky after putting all the problem cases together. Two or three such power sets together were a liability, but with six of them working in tandem, a bland kind of alchemy took place. Their powers, teamwork, strategy, tactics and work ethic had a simplicity and efficiency that would impress an engineer. Each member became a precision component in a machine, going from unremarkable to formidable. Like a saw cutting through trees, Team Work Saw was efficient and reliable.

Both Team Biscuit and Team Work Saw were categorised as generalists by the Adventure Society but, in truth, they were really unrecognised specialists. Team Biscuit specialised in the one in ten or so monsters that were strange or extreme enough that conventional teams would find them troublesome. Team Work Saw specialised in the other nine out of ten. They would have trouble with the exact monsters Team Biscuit were best suited to handle, but the other nine out of ten they went through like a buzz saw. They were fast, if not the fastest, but their true strength was reliability and efficiency. Not only did they do the job right every time, but they could keep going when other teams called it quits, energy exhausted and resources depleted.

Team Work Saw were not thought highly of amongst guild elites. Guilds valued flashy powers and epic kills that would bring prestige and influence. The Adventure Society, on the

other hand, adored them. Guild elites were always looking to prove themselves with big ticket contracts, leaving the meat-and-potatoes work for ordinary adventurers. Team Work Saw went through ordinary contracts like a lumber operation through a forest, their consistent and efficient work leaving the Adventure Society quietly enamoured of them.

The Builder constructs the teams encountered on the island were not monsters, but for most practical purposes, they may as well have been. They weren't extreme in their construction, at least the mass-produced silver-rank ones, and they lacked any truly strange powers. This made them much the same as the middle-of-the-road monsters Team Work Saw excelled at handling. Coming in reasonable but not excessive numbers, they were perfect opponents for the Rimaros team.

Jason's team was shown up quite severely by the guild elites. They were in no danger, but they didn't come close to the clean, methodical approach of the other team, their kill count falling considerably short. Humphrey and Neil, being the most conventional members of the team, did the best. The others were using ten-dollar solutions to one-dollar problems because their power sets eschewed simple and effective abilities for potent-but-complex ones.

As they made their way through the city, the Rimaros team had started to take on an air of superiority as the kill count widened. They remained friendly and professional, not crowing over their allies, but they were plainly feeling good about themselves. They were carving through enemies quickly and cleanly while Jason's team were using over-powered and overly elaborate strategies to accomplish the same thing in more time with less efficiency.

The validation of their methods left them in high spirits. Normally occupying a lower rung of the ladder, at least within the guild elites, they were simply enjoying a rare chance to have fun big-noting themselves. They were also well aware that their strengths and weaknesses were inverted for Jason and his team, neither dismissing nor undervaluing them.

Jason's senses got a feel for the Purity group ahead long before they encountered them. What he sensed alarmed him in several regards. While the presence of only three essence-user auras was a relief, the two gold-rank auras he sensed were deeply troubling. Even though they were not essence users, their rank was not to be overlooked.

The other concerning issue was the cores he sensed inside the vast majority of the enemy forces, including the gold-rankers. He could immediately tell these were modified clockwork cores. Jason's own experience in purging the Builder's influence from the magic door he absorbed and the World-Phoenix's influence from the magic bridge gave him unique insights. He could tell that an equivalent process had been used on the cores.

Jason immediately recognised that his ability to impede Builder magic would have no impact on these cores, purged as they were of the Builder's influence. He would need to deal with them the old-fashioned way. He opened up voice chat to share his insights with the expedition.

“The group ahead of us has been mostly created through clockwork core implantation, but these aren't the cores we've seen in the past. The Church of Purity has somehow figured out how to purge the Builder's influence, so while these are another form of converted, any assumptions based on the Builder variants may no longer hold. For those unaware, converted turn essence users into non-essence users of one rank higher. They are weak for the rank, with only a few powers, but the group ahead of us has two gold-rank converted and three silver-rank essence users. Other groups are likely to have a similar makeup.”

Jason's team was the first to get a good aura read on the enemy but not the first to engage them. Just as Jason had, the teams fighting shared information they learned about the enemy. The pure converted, as it turned out, did diverge in several overt ways from the Builder's version. While their bodies were modified, it wasn't to the grotesque extreme of the Builder converted. The good news from this was that they didn't have the Builder converted's incredible resilience.

What the pure converted did have was a power they all possessed, on top of any other abilities they had obtained. The source of this purification ability was clearly the God of Purity. While that power might have been fourth-hand by the time it got to them—passing from the god to the purified clockwork king to the purified core and, finally, to the converted—a god was a god. Even a meagre scrap of its power, claimed like a lucky dip prize, was nothing to scoff at.

The nature of the power was especially relevant to Jason. The auras of the pure converted slowly cleansed any afflictions they or their allies were suffering, much like Sophie's aura was able to do. Their auras also seemed to negate boons on their enemies as well. What's more, the auras of the pure converted seemed to grow stronger by overlapping, which seemed to blend them into a single, more powerful aura.

Jason and his team found their enemies marching down a wide, cracked boulevard, upslope from them on a tilted street. Both sides moved immediately to the attack, but it was their auras that clashed first; Jason had the strongest individual aura out of anyone in either adventuring team or the Purity forces. Even the gold-rank converted were not his equal, their auras being the biggest indicator of their jumped-up rank. They were weaker than many peak silver essence users in that regard. By merging their auras, however, they were able to outmatch Jason's, although it wasn't enough to suppress him in turn.

This meant that Jason could not suppress the enemy's aura effect, but neither could the enemy shut down his. The power of the combined enemy aura was more effective at suppressing the auras of Jason's allies, though, and he didn't have the spare

strength to help them. The solution to that imbalance of power was the same as it always was: fight until he grew stronger.

Humphrey issued directions as both sides erupted into battle. The Rimaros team didn't have any powers as exciting as familiars but the familiars from Jason's team sprang into action, focusing on the mass of bronze and silver-rank converted. The gold-rankers and essence users were for the adventurers to handle themselves.

Stash turned into a marsh hydra as Onslow started pouring elemental magic into the enemy from his rune shell powers, throwing out hailstones and lightning bolts. Clive fed him more mana to keep his powers refreshed. Belinda's familiars also went into action. Her astral lamp familiar, Glimmer, was a being that hovered around her like a magic item, replenishing the mana of allies while firing off force projectiles. Her other familiar was the echo spirit, Gemini, who was a living illusion that could mimic Belinda's allies. At lower ranks, it had been purely illusionary, to serve as a distraction, but with greater rank came the ability to mimic attacks using force projections. It copied Stash, turning into another hydra, but it looked like an underpowered hologram, occasionally blurring and flickering.

As for Jason's familiars, Gordon remained inside Jason. The extra aura strength he could provide was something Jason very much needed and the shields from the eye orbs were already intercepting ranged attacks. Shade bodies shot off, disappearing into the shadows of debris, buildings and his fellow adventurers. Colin, in his blood clone form, was switch-teleported by Clive. A confused member of the converted appeared where Colin had been standing and Colin appeared amidst the enemy, immediately exploding into a rain of leeches. The converted man, now amongst the team, was immediately wrapped in vines by a spell from Neil. The thorny tendrils cracked flagstones as they dug their way up from beneath the road to entangle the converted.

Ability: [Verdant Cage] (Growth)

- Spell/Conjuration (poison).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: 30 seconds.
-
- Current rank: Silver 1 (77%).
-
- Effect (iron): Grow vines to restrain a target. More effective in areas already containing plant life.
-
- Effect (bronze): Binding plants have damaging thorns.
-
- Effect (silver): Thorns inflict poison. The type of poison is determined by the surrounding environment.

The enemy was rushing to the attack, not standing around to wait for the adventurers to unload powers. The two defensive specialists, Sophie and her more traditional counterpart from the Rimaros team, moved to intercept one of the gold-rankers each. The remaining front-liners were the two brawlers from the other team and Humphrey, who set up a defensive line. Because the enemy was so numerous, Belinda joined them.

Counterfeit Combatant was a power that, like her Instant Adept ability, altered her body and gave her advantages when using certain kinds of equipment. Rather than making her

swift and agile, however, it transformed Belinda into a tall, burly woman. She then equipped her heavy armour, spear and shield directly from her storage space.

Ability: [Bag of Tricks] (Magic)

- Special Ability (dimension).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 3 (03%).
-
- Effect (iron): You have a personal, dimensional storage space. You may equip any item in your storage space directly onto your person or unequip anything on your person directly to your storage space.
-
- Effect (bronze): Weapons, shields and armour equipped directly on your person from your storage space gain a random boon.
-
- Effect (silver): Weapons you equip grant you a special attack. Armour and shields you equip gain an ability in addition to any they may have already. The special

attacks and abilities gained are of the same rank as the item.

Both her Bag of Tricks and Counterfeit Combatant gave Belinda powers appropriate to her current state and gear. Unfortunately, the aura of the enemies quickly cleared her bonus buff powers. The abilities she received were somewhat random and they didn't make her the equal of the other frontliners, but it was close enough to get the job done. As always, Belinda's jack-of-all-trades expertise was not in being the best at what she did but being whatever her team needed most.

With a frontline established, the rest of the adventurers arrayed behind them. Team Work Saw's ranged attackers were already firing off powers while Jason conjured his dagger and began loading up the vine-wrapped converted with afflictions. The healer from the Rimaros team stood at the ready while Neil set out a quick summoning circle. Clive was quickly setting out his own rituals, establishing the power boost he would need to start ripping into the enemy.

IDEAL ENEMY

THE PURITY FORCES ARRAYED AGAINST JASON'S TEAM AND their adventurer allies numbered in the dozens, although more than half were only bronze rank. The key threats were the two gold-rank converted, the three silver-rank essence users and, to a lesser degree, the fifteen or so silver converted.

The powers of the Purity converted were less bizarre than those of their Builder equivalent, without the body-horror transformations. Beneath the surface, however, Jason could sense that the cores inside them had caused more internal changes than was readily apparent. In terms of powers, most were predicated on producing flames or conjuring objects. In both cases, the fire or items produced were an ethereal silver.

The focal point of the battle was the two gold-rankers leading the way for the Purity forces as they charged down the broken and sloping street. One opened an aperture on his head, like the empty socket of a third eye. A stream of fire came spewing out of it and towards the adventurers. The fire was eerie, silver and ethereal, as if only an illusion. The heat pouring off it was very real, however, and it was tinged with disruptive-force damage, which was highly effective against most magical defences.

The defender from Team Work Saw looked like he'd come off a recruiting poster for defence specialists. Henry Xeller was a leonid and big even for his species, clad in ornate heavy armour, lacquered blue and gold with a lion motif. In one hand was a heavy mace, the stylised lion head matching his armour.

His hefty shield completed the set, the lion's head image having its mouth open in a roar.

Henry held up his shield as the magical fire came pouring in and let out a roar. He had already evolved the racial gift roar power that leonids possessed, and his version diminished the magic in area attacks. The silver flames became dull as the disruptive force they contained was diminished, but the heat was unaffected. Henry held up his shield and the flames were sucked into the mouth of the lion head on it, preventing them from reaching the rest of the front line.

The gold-ranker didn't let up, pouring out more of the fire. The shield continued sucking it in, the metal visibly heating up. Henry was unfazed, not even looking at the heat glow of the metal slab strapped to his arm.

The other gold-ranker conjured translucent armour over her entire body. Despite having the look and coverage of heavy armour, it didn't slow down her gold-rank reflexes at all. Along with the armour, she conjured a short-handled, double-headed axe into each hand. The weapons and armour both were wreathed in ghostly fire.

Unlike the first gold-ranker, who stood back to spew out flames, this one charged in and was intercepted by Sophie. While the gold-rank converted lacked in many areas compared to an essence user, her basic attributes were not among them. She had the full strength and speed that demonstrated just how big a jump gold rank was even from the already formidable silver.

When all of that speed and power was brought to bear on Sophie, she didn't flinch. If anything, the gold-rank converted was an ideal enemy: one with the speed and power to push her limits without a dangerous slate of fancy powers. Instead, she just hit hard and fast, which Sophie was well-equipped to handle.

Sophie was normally the most mobile one in a fight, but she let the converted juke around her as she dodged and blocked while standing mostly in place. She moved fast but on the spot instead of repositioning. The twin axes were a barely

discernible blur as they came down on Sophie again and again, yet she was completely a match for the gold-ranker's speed. Both combatants were blurs to the people around them, with Sophie especially flickering like a figure in corrupted video footage.

Ability: [Between the Raindrops] (Swift)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
 - Cost: High mana per second and high stamina per second.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 3 (17%)
-
- Effect (iron): Increased reflexes and spatial awareness.
-
- Effect (bronze): Increase speed through spatial distortion. More effective at improving short, erratic motions than straight-line speed.
-
- Effect (silver): Dodge using spatial distortion.

Between the Raindrops wasn't the only speed-increasing power Sophie possessed, but it was the most effective for the

quick movement of a duel. The silver-rank space-distorting effect was essentially the same as the one Jason's cloak picked up at silver rank, causing even hits that seemed to land to miss. It was a difficult power to use effectively, but Sophie had mastered it much more quickly than Jason.

Unable to outpace her, the converted attempted to take advantage of Sophie's decision to not run around by body-checking her. It did not go well.

Ability: [Mirage Step] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension, movement, illusion).
 - Cost: Low stamina and mana.
 - Cooldown: 40 seconds.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (81%).
-
- Effect (iron): Move instantaneously to a nearby location, leaving an afterimage behind.
-
- Effect (bronze): Can be used a second time. Cooldown reduced to 35 seconds, with a use regained every cooldown period. Attacking an afterimage creates a disorienting, short-lived, dimensionally distorted illusion space that traps the attacker.

- Effect (silver): Can be used a third time. Regain one use every 30 seconds. Afterimages and dimensional distortions fire dimensional blades throughout their duration at random enemies, inflicting sharp and resonating-force damage.

The gold-ranker slammed into the afterimage Sophie left behind, becoming trapped in a spatial distortion that looked like a wobbly soap bubble from the outside, while the inside was filled with disorienting kaleidoscopic images. Blades of force shot off at other converted, and while the gold-ranker was only trapped for a handful of seconds, Sophie made the most of them, leaping high into the air.

Ability: [Eternal Moment] (Swift)

- Special Ability.
 - Cost: Extreme mana-per-second and stamina-per-second.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (37%).
-
- Effect (iron): Operate at a highly accelerated speed for one second of actual time, which is extended in subjective time.

- Effect (bronze): Time increases to 2 seconds.
- Effect (silver): Time increases to 3 seconds.

Sophie's Eternal Moment power was potentially her strongest, but also her least exciting to rank up. It was incredibly formidable nonetheless, giving her critical time to act. In the air above the battle, she accelerated her personal time stream until everything around her seemed to freeze in place.

By this point, the frontline was a mess of converted and adventurers, lined up and clashing on the street. Sophie fired off a rapid stream of attacks with her Wind Blade power, the blades freezing in place until she slowed back down into the normal flow of time. She aimed the blades into the crowd of converted, not at the one she was fighting.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Silver 2 (97%).
- Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.

- Effect (bronze): Blades increase in length while travelling and track targets.
- Effect (silver): Blades explode on impact, detonating a horizontal ring of cutting force from each penetrated enemy.

Sophie's power wreaked havoc amongst the enemy as time unfroze. It wasn't especially powerful, although it didn't feel that way to the bronze-rank converted. It served as more of a distraction to the silver-rankers, while acting as chum in the water for the leech swarm amongst them as Sophie's power drew blood.

Dropping back in front of the gold-ranker just as she was freed from the illusion space, axe blows once more rained down on Sophie. Most of them were not dodged, Sophie instead choosing to block them directly. She didn't use weapons of her own, intercepting attacks mostly with her hands, forearms and shins, but with whatever worked—even her head. So long as she was actively intercepting the attack, her power took effect.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability (magic).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 3 (21%).
- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful attacks will be negated.
- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Momentum] when intercepting physical attacks.
- Effect (silver): Damage increases with each blow when making rapid, consecutive attacks.
- [Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking): When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.

Immortal Fist was one of Sophie's signature abilities and the one that allowed her to intercept weapons with her bare hands. As it ranked up, it gave her a couple of options to enhance her weak attacks, either by saving up for a big hit using the momentum buff or by rapid-firing attacks. Against the fast and

tough gold-ranker, she chose not to counterattack, saving up for a big hit.

While the gold-ranker's powers were largely straightforward, that did not mean she was without additional tricks. Every time Sophie intercepted an attack, the silver fire wreathing the weapons attempted to crawl onto her body.

- You have been afflicted with [Cleansing Flame].
- Ability [Radiant Fist] has negated the application of [Cleansing Flame].

Sophie's unarmed fighting style wouldn't work if she was subjected to the deleterious effects of every object she touched. The other ability that was quintessential her fighting style helped shield her from such effects.

Ability: [Radiant Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability (magic).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (37%).
-
- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage, which is highly effective against magical defences and intangible or incorporeal enemies. Unarmed attacks do not trigger

retaliation effects. Negate any non-damage effects from actively intercepted attacks.

- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Impervious] when intercepting non-physical attacks. Gain mana when intercepting magical projectiles.
- Effect (silver): After intercepting a magical projectile you may make a disruptive-force projectile attack.
- [Impervious] (boon, magic, stacking): Resistances are increased and damage reduction is gained against non-physical damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

A major deficit of Sophie's power set was the lack of simple, high-impact abilities. Her few big-ticket powers required specific circumstances, extensive set-up, or both. The vast majority of Sophie's powers were minor effects that required high levels of skill to leverage. Fortunately, she had a power that offered a comprehensive enhancement to this style by intensifying many of those minor effects.

Ability: [Child of the Celestial Wind] (Wind)

- Special Ability (dimension, holy).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (76%).
- Effect (iron): Your celestine racial powers have increased effect. You gain damage reduction to disruptive-force damage.
- Effect (bronze): All your dimension and wind-related abilities have increased effect. You have increased resistance to dimension and wind-based effects and enemies subjected to your wind-related abilities suffer disruptive-force damage.
- Effect (silver): Boons with maximum effect thresholds have their maximum thresholds increased.

Sophie was never going to be a damage powerhouse, but her offensive ability escalated just enough with each rank that she was never safe to ignore. Key to this was the nature of the damage she inflicted, which was a combination of resonating and disruptive force. These damage types excelled at penetrating physical and magical defences respectively, which was highly relevant against the gold-ranker.

The conjured armour of the converted Sophie was fighting proved to be an excellent defensive measure against conventional forms of attack, even magical ones. This was true not just for the gold-ranker but also for the lower-ranked converted with similar powers. The ranged attackers on the

adventurer side, pouring attacks into the enemy, were finding that their efforts against the armoured enemies were being shrugged off.

The armour was so effective because it integrated magic and physical defences with high efficacy. Breaching it effectively required either a massive amount of damage or a combination of damage types that could weaken both aspects. This was another reason that the enemy was a perfect fit for Sophie, who was building up to break her opponent's armour and expose it to the adventurer's attacks.

Sophie's approach to combat, in spite of her speed, was to take it slow. The early stages of the fight were when she was weakest, so she treated battles as a marathon more than a sprint. The longer a battle went on, the harder she was to kill, the faster she healed and the more her damage went from weak but penetrative to a major threat. She also became more and more dangerous not just to fight against, but to stop fighting against once started.

Ability: [Karmic Warrior] (Balance)

- Special Ability (healing, recovery).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 3 (20%).
-
- Effect (iron): Gain an instance of [Agent of Karma] when subjected to damage or any harmful effect, even if the damage and/or effect was wholly negated.

- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Good Karma] when healing others, cleansing others or suffering damage. Enemies that attack or take offensive actions against you are inflicted with [Bad Karma]. So long as any enemy has an instance of [Bad Karma], you have [Karmic Sacrifice].
- Effect (silver): When an enemy with [Bad Karma] dies or is destroyed, your cooldowns are reduced for each instance of [Good Karma] you have.
- [Agent of Karma] (boon, holy): Bonus to the [Power] and [Spirit] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.
- [Bad Karma] (affliction, retributive, holy): Suffer a small amount of retributive, transcendent damage when making an attack or other offensive action against anyone without the [Karmic Sacrifice] boon. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.
- [Good Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): Bonus to [Recovery]. Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.

- [Karmic Sacrifice] (boon, holy, heal-over-time): Gain an ongoing healing effect, with strength determined by the amount of [Good Karma] you have accrued. This effect immediately ends if there are no enemies suffering from [Bad Karma].

Karmic Warrior was one of Sophie's most impactful powers, although even that was a slow burn, accumulating over time. The gold-rank converted were trump cards for the Purity forces, but this particular one had been stopped dead by Sophie. She was unable to take Sophie down or escape past her, meaning she was a non-factor on the rest of the fight. The bad karma affliction she accumulated attacking Sophie meant that attacking anyone else while Sophie still stood was a bad idea.

The gold-ranker could instinctively sense the nature of the bad karma effect. If she attacked anyone but Sophie now, she would suffer retribution damage. Even worse, the damage would be transcendent, completely ignoring any defences she possessed. She was stuck facing Sophie until one of them went down, but Sophie was only growing stronger.

Like Jason, Sophie started fights at her weakest, becoming more powerful as time went on. She also, like much of the team, had evolved the ability to ignore much of the disparity from fighting enemies above her rank. Dangerous and powerful enemies were something of a stock in trade for her team and they had adapted accordingly. Where many silver-ranked adventurers would sweat facing a gold-ranker, even one very weak for its rank, Sophie grinned and welcomed the challenge.

TRYING TO KILL JASON AGAIN

SOPHIE HAD ONE OF THE TWO GOLD-RANK CONVERTED BOUND up in personal combat. The gold-rankers were the primary threat to the adventurers, so keeping them occupied while the adventurers took down the rest of the Purity forces was critical. Sophie had managed to box hers up effectively, but she had the advantage of fighting an enemy that lacked area attacks. The other gold-rank converted was more trouble.

Spewing fire from an orifice on his forehead, like an empty socket for a third eye, was the signature move of the other gold-rank converted. He could also condense the fire into flaming fists the size of a human torso that he could fling to explode amongst his enemies.

The capacity for area attacks made the other gold-rank converted harder to contain than the one Sophie had boxed up. It was Team Work Saw's dedicated defender, Henry, who took on that task. Compared to Sophie, he was a defence specialist in the classic mode, built around enduring hits. His essence combination of iron, might and gathering gave him the prison confluence. The resulting power set combined a powerful defence with control effects that could bind enemies, lock down their abilities and even use their powers to fuel his own. He could increase the cooldowns of enemy powers, whether they were essence abilities or not, as well as shield allies from area attacks. He could absorb the energy of many such attacks, storing it until he unleashed it back on his enemies. Gold-rank attacks were pushing him to his limits, however.

With the gold-ranker attacking from range, Henry took the battle to him. Chains broke through the ground to bind the converted, and while they didn't hold him for long, it was enough for Henry to close the distance, barrelling aside less powerful enemies with his leonid strength. The lesser foes he could leave to the brawlers making up the rest of the defensive line.

Like the rest of Team Work Saw, Henry was a typical but elite combatant. He lacked the kind of powers that Jason's team leveraged to realign the entire paradigm of a battle, but his fundamentals were rock solid. His abilities were all about taking hits, shielding others or offering impediments to enemies that were minor, yet critical if used well. As the one responsible for keeping his team safe, Henry understood the price of mistakes.

Like most traditional defence specialists, Henry's combat style was heavily reliant on his armour and shield. They were not only of the finest quality but also reinforced by abilities from his iron essence. The efforts of Sophie and Henry gave the rest of their teams the freedom to take the fight to the remaining Purity forces, but the problems of rank disparity were putting increasing pressure on Henry.

Compared to Sophie's enemy, whose powers were primarily defensive with the conjured armour, the powers of Henry's opponent were focused on attacking. As superb as Henry's armour was, it was still a suit of silver-rank armour suffering gold-rank attacks. The strain began to show as it accumulated dents and scorch marks.

Henry was far from on the brink of collapse, still holding the line admirably. He was startled, then appreciative when assistance arrived in the form of a monster. Humphrey's shape-changing dragon familiar took on the form of a three-headed dog the size of a horse. Each head blew out freezing magical winds, tinged with blue and silver. It was not enough to negate the silver flames the gold-ranker was throwing out, but it diminished them enough to take at least some of the pressure off Henry.

While the front-liners staved off the charging Purity forces, the adventurers behind weren't slacking off. Neil had been summoning up his chrysalis golem, a crystalline behemoth that lumbered forward to take some of the pressure off the beleaguered defensive line.

The other back-liners hadn't been idle either. While Jason, Neil and Clive were making preparations, the ranged attackers from the Rimaros team were already at work. They had been hammering powers into the wave of onrushing enemies from the instant the battle began, taking as much pressure off the frontline as they could.

While Neil was summoning his golem, Clive was laying out the enhancement rituals that would supercharge his wand and staff attacks, in between feeding mana to his familiar. Jason was standing in front of the enemy Clive had teleported into the backline as the battle first began and Neil had tied up in vines. Jason rapidly dosed the helpless converted with afflictions as she struggled to escape.

- [Pure Converted] has attempted to cleanse sin. Cleanse effect has failed.

When Jason had faced a trio of Purity adherents alone, their powers had been well-suited to counter his afflictions. Even so, Jason had been hurting them quite a lot until bad timing, bad choices and being outnumbered three to one proved too much. The reason that his afflictions had gained traction in that fight, despite their cleansing powers, was that Jason was not an unresisting victim of his powers being cleansed.

Amongst Jason's growing list of afflictions were several that were specifically focused on interacting with cleanse effects. While many power sets dabbled in afflictions, these were the kinds of effects that were the hallmark of affliction specialists.

- [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Subject gains an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from them.
- [Persecution] (affliction, curse, stacking): Subject gains resistance to incoming boon, recovery, cleanse and heal-over-time effects. These resistances cannot be voluntarily lowered. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Subject suffers transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from them.

Jason's afflictions were enough to trouble even Purity loyalists with no shortage of cleansing powers. It hadn't been enough to beat three prepared essence users of equal rank, but it had certainly given them more trouble than they had been anticipating. Those had been Purity's elite troops, essence users dedicated to the God of Purification. The converted were merely the god's foot soldiers, many conscripted against their will. While they also had an innate cleansing power through their shared aura, it wasn't enough to shut Jason's powers down.

- You have inflicted [Harbinger of Doom] on [Pure Converted].
- [Pure Converted] has resisted.

- [Harbinger of Doom] does not take effect.

It wasn't enough to *completely* shut Jason's powers down.

Jason muttered grouchily as the eye orb he sent into the converted's body failed to trigger the butterfly-producing affliction that would spread his other maledictions. He sent the second of the two orbs floating around him to sink into the converted.

- You have inflicted [Harbinger of Doom] on [Pure Converted].

Blue and orange butterflies immediately manifested on the converted.

"Better," Jason said to himself with a nod. "Clive, you're good to send this one back."

"Sure thing," Clive said and cast a spell.

Ability: [Juxtapose] (Balance)

- Spell (dimension, magic).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.
-
- Current rank: Silver 1 (88%)

- Effect (iron): Swap the location of two allies and/or enemies. You must be able to see both subjects of the spell. If an ally resists or otherwise prevents the effect, this ability is negated but the cooldown is reduced to 30 seconds.
- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by this ability take additional damage from all sources for a brief period.
- Effect (silver): Enemies affected by this spell are afflicted with [Inescapable].
- [Inescapable] (affliction, magic): The subject cannot be affected by non-hostile teleport or dimension effects.

The converted vanished from the middle of Neil's vines, teleported back into the midst of the enemy. In her place appeared another converted, immediately tangled up in the vines vacated by the one that Clive teleported away. The new converted was only bronze rank and was completely helpless as vines wormed their way around his limbs, poisonous thorns digging into his flesh.

Clive stood in a ritual circle on the ground. In his right hand was a staff with another glowing ritual circle attached to the end, like someone had glued on an elaborate neon plate. In his left was a wand with a similar, but smaller setup. He rested the staff against the chest of the struggling bronze-ranker and explosive force erupted out, scattering the converted's chest over the street behind it and the wall of a nearby building.

Jason nodded at Clive, then vanished into a Shade body. Clive turned to look at the enemy where the glowing forms of blue and orange butterflies had started to multiply. He shared a glance with Neil before turning his attention back to the enemy. The Purity forces were coming at them down a sloping street, so Clive was readily able to shoot force projectiles over the heads of the frontline.

The initial stages of the battle had been a little hairy as half of Jason's team chose to hang back and make preparations rather than immediately engage the enemy. Team Work Saw had been doing most of the heavy lifting while half of Jason's team got ready, but once they were, the battle shifted firmly to the advantage of the adventurers.

Clive was an artillery piece. With his already powerful staff and wand boosted by the power of combat rituals, what would normally be simple force projectiles were sowing chaos as they exploded amongst the enemy. Neil's damage-soaking golem helped stabilise the front line and Jason's butterflies were spreading afflictions so powerful that the bronze-ranked converted barely had time to produce more butterflies to spread before dying horribly.

The gold-rank threats were occupied. The adventurer's frontline was stronger than ever with the addition of Neil's damage-soaking golem, which at silver rank could magically connect with allies and absorb their damage. The Purity force's numerical advantage was largely neutralised by chaos in the ranks, courtesy of Clive's blasting, Gordon's butterflies and Colin's leeches. Jason was mostly waiting for people afflicted enough to be worth draining. The battle was moving from a question of achieving victory to waiting for it.

Another advantage swinging in the adventurers' direction was that with every converted that fell, their combined aura strength grew weaker. As the suppression force diminished, the adventurer's auras started pushing back against it and their aura powers took effect. This was another eleven auras joining Jason's in offering boosts to the two teams. From enhanced attributes to mana recovery rates, the accumulated effects

represented a jump in power—arguably the greatest strength of adventurers acting in number.

Jason moved amongst the increasingly scattered enemy, a shadow flickering through their ranks with impunity. His magical senses kept him from the path of Clive's force blasts—mostly—and he drained the afflictions from enemies right before those afflictions killed them. With the bronze-rankers, already on the verge of death, it was enough to finish the job.

- [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Subject suffers transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from them.

Jason's afflictions spreading to the gold-rankers was the beginning of the end; he sensed the three essence users in the Purity group trying to slink away in the fog of war. That did not work out. Once Jason's afflictions were on them, he was able to track their location perfectly until they cleansed themselves, which he imagined was their priority once they evaded the adventurers.

After what happened the last time, Jason wasn't going to take on another trio of silver-rank Purity adherents alone. It took only a quick comment over voice chat to get Humphrey teleporting into the path of the escaping essence users. His very immediate approach to damage kept them too busy to stop and use the powerful cleansing spells they were increasingly in need of with every passing moment. With Humphrey threatening them from the front and Jason harrying them from the rear, neither victory nor escape was an option.

Jason did the cleansing for them, purging all the curses, poisons and other horrific things he had piled onto them in the first place. What replaced them were holy afflictions that annihilated the Purity adherents from the inside out, except for the one who had suffered enough damage that the cleansing itself killed him.

Jason wanted the others alive, so he used the power of his new sword to remove the fresh afflictions before they killed the others.

- Effect: The wielder may cleanse all holy afflictions inflicted by the abilities and soul-bound items of the wielder from an enemy touched by [Hegemon's Will]. For each affliction cleansed, the enemy suffers an instance of [Hegemon's Mercy] and the wielder gains an instance of [Benevolent Hegemon].
- [Hegemon's Mercy] (affliction, holy, stacking): The victim of this effect is subjected to a powerful suppressive force affecting all magical abilities. This affects essence abilities, innate abilities and item abilities. Abilities derived from external transcendent sources are affected more strongly. This affliction drops off rapidly when not within the area of the wielder of [Hegemon's Will]'s aura. Additional instances have increased effect.
- [Benevolent Hegemon] (boon, holy, stacking): The strength of allied aura power effects overlapping with your aura is increased. This does not affect suppressive strength or resistance to aura suppression. Additional instances have increased effect.

Transcendent light flowed out of the two essence users and into the sword Jason held up over his head.

“Why are you holding your sword like that?” Humphrey asked.

“Fabulous secret powers were revealed to me the day I held aloft my magic sword—”

“Never mind.”

In the aftermath of the battle, most of the converted were dead, aside from one gold-ranker. Like the two essence user prisoners, the gold-rank converted that had been fighting Sophie was now under the suppressing effect of Jason’s hegemon’s mercy affliction. That only shut off her powers and not her formidable physicality, which meant that her potent recovery attribute kept healing her enough that she started stirring back to consciousness.

Sophie resolved the issue by occasionally kicking her in the head. Humphrey looked on with disapproval but remained silent for lack of a better idea. They could only wait for Jana, one of the expedition’s gold-rankers. After being notified of the capture, she was en route to take the prisoners in hand.

Carlos was the healer of Team Work Saw and also the leader. While the group was waiting, he looked over at the field of dead converted they had moved away from, concern on his face.

“Does anyone else think that fight was strange?”

“What do you mean?” Humphrey asked.

“What was the point? They had to know that the odds of taking down two teams of guild-level adventurers were lean, even with those high-rank converted. Why take the risk? It’s not like we were hiding our auras, but they didn’t avoid us at all.”

“It does make you wonder what the loose group of Purity people are up to,” Jason said. “That aura beacon they set off might not just be for escape purposes.”

All three adventurer teams had defeated the Purity groups they encountered. Two of the Purity groups had combined into a larger force, though, making for a much more dangerous fight. The adventurers that had taken them on had still won with the intervention of Liara and Jana, but the fight had been hard-fought and chaotic, spilling through streets and buildings, some of which were brought down by the conflict.

The fight was eventually won, but in the wild mess, some of the Purity essence users had escaped. Worse, they had taken three defeated adventurers with them, although the adventurers had been alive when last seen.

All the adventurer teams had been directed to hunt them down, Jason guiding them through his map power that tracked the captured adventurers. That was when some kind of aura beacon in the middle of the city had been triggered. It blanketed the city in a non-hostile but extremely pervasive false aura that prevented aura senses from tracking anyone. As Jason's map power worked through his aura senses, he was no longer able to pinpoint the captured adventurers. It also had a diminishing effect on Jason's party interface, but only made communication patchy at longer ranges rather than shutting it down entirely.

The powerful effect was not something the Purity forces would have been able to bring with them and was likely something they had known about beforehand. The adventurers postulated it was what had given them the boldness to act so overtly as they could use it to cover their retreat.

Once the beacon went active, Liara had directed the teams into search patterns while Jana moved to claim the prisoners that Jason's group had captured. Jason's group were waiting on her arrival before they joined the search.

"I think they're up to something," Carlos said. "Moving this openly, this close to Rimaros seems like a stupid risk. They're not going to do it just for a few risky fights against adventurers."

"I imagine they want something here," Jason postulated. "Something they don't expect to be left behind once our

expedition is done, or they wouldn't act while we're still here."

"They're probably trying to kill Jason again," Neil said. "Can I get one of those cake sandwiches?"

"Kill Jason?" Carlos asked.

"He and the Builder have this whole thing," Belinda said. "The Builder won't use his own people, so he wants Purity to do it, but they don't seem to be trying that hard, if I'm being honest."

"They tried pretty hard," Jason said. He pulled a large tray from his inventory, piled high with chocolate cake sandwiches, offering them to everyone. The local variant of cocoa beans weren't exactly the same as Earth, which excited Jason; the chocolate produced from them offered exciting possibilities.

"Why won't the Builder use its own people?" Henry asked Jason. "And why you specifically?"

"Hang out with him for a while," Neil said. "You'll figure it out."

"Neil, what did we say about trying to be nicer?" Humphrey asked.

"I don't know," Neil said. "I was only pretending to listen."

HERE TO STEAL

THE COMMANDER OF THE PURITY FORCES ON THE ISLAND WAS Sendira. She had separated from most of the converted in her group, leaving them on the surface to delay and distract any adventurers that found the entrance to the underground complex they were using. Only the other two essence users and the pair of gold-rank converted assigned to her moved with her into the underground portions of the city.

The subterranean infrastructure beneath the city had been devastated by the detonation of a weapon of mass destruction, collapsing the vast majority of it. Navigating to the location where the clockwork kings were producing more constructs would be difficult and dangerous. With most of the tunnels and chambers having either collapsed already or being on the verge of doing so, a combination of the right powers and the right knowledge was essential to traversing them.

Sendira did not know where Melody obtained the information she had about the island infrastructure and did not ask. She had faith in Melody and the priest, Laront, second only to her faith in their god. The information Melody gave Sendira was only part of the equation, however, as it predated the massive destruction. At best it gave her some potential entry points to check.

The real trick would be navigating the new state of the subterranean complex, for which one of the essence users with Sendira was required. Fila and Ramona weren't wrong in their assumption that Sendira wanted them under her thumb instead of causing trouble for Melody's plans. That was only a

secondary concern to Sendira, who needed their powers to complete the task before them. Fila had a scouting power set, with abilities from the air essence that let her navigate by tracing airflow. She would be able to seek out viable pathways forward, saving vast amounts of time by avoiding dead ends. It made her ideal for navigating the dangerous underground passages beneath the city. As for Ramona, her earth essence powers would help assure their safety while exploring unstable tunnels.

The trio of essence users and their two gold-rank converted moved through the tunnels. They squeezed their way down half-collapsed passages and dropped through floors that had fallen into rooms below. Fila plotted their path forward and down while Ramona cleared passages so that more than a breeze could pass through them. She also warned them of critically unstable areas where they needed to detour or they would bring the roof down on themselves.

As they realised that they were genuinely needed, the suspicious attitudes of Fila and Ramona were tamped down, although far from eliminated. While they might be antagonistic over leadership within the Order of Redeeming Light, they were, ultimately, allies. Their loyalty to the order itself was unflinching and allowed them to work together. While not above a bit of backstabbing, they all understood that the true enemy was an unclean world.

The gold-rank adventurer, Jana, arrived to shackle the gold-rank converted that Jason and his allies captured. She took them away for delivery to a support platform floating offshore that was the base station for the scouts maintaining surveillance on the island. Jana brought with her instructions from Liara that Team Work Saw and Team Biscuit were not to join the search for the captured adventurers but to find and disable the aura beacon. The beacon's false aura was blanketing the island, disrupting senses and communication and hampering the search for the enemy and their prisoners.

These two teams were the obvious choice for the task, given Jason's enhanced senses and insight into Builder magic. More importantly, they had Clive.

"Who's Reed Richards?" Clive asked as he listened to Jason.

"He's basically my world's version of you."

"And you know this person?"

"No, he's made up. He's kind of unrealistically good at all the magic. They call it science, but it's clearly magic gibber."

"Um, thank you?"

While a gold-rank stealth specialist like Jana could move safely through the city even at speed, two teams of silver-rank adventurers could not. With plenty of constructs still roaming around, they had to balance caution and speed. Slogging through pack after pack of constructs would take longer than carefully avoiding them, so they took a 'slow is smooth, smooth is fast' approach.

The terrain continued to be complicated, with broken streets, collapsed buildings and whole sections that had fallen into the ground as the subterranean infrastructure below it collapsed. It left the ground beneath their feet precarious, even if it felt solid. Humphrey triggered a ground collapse with his dive bomb special attack, pulling an entire building down on himself. He had been forced to teleport out of its path, but it conveniently finished off the constructs he'd been fighting.

Jason's first thought had been to stealth ahead to the beacon himself and portal people in. His senses could pick out the source of the white-noise aura blasting across the city, but he quickly discovered that it also blocked portal abilities. After discovering this, the teams paused to do some experimentation.

Their tests revealed that short-range, personal teleportation like shadow-jumping still worked, but teleporting beyond line of sight or opening portals failed entirely. Anything affecting someone other than the person using the power also failed, including Clive's switch-teleport, even though it was short-

ranged as well. Other dimensional abilities seemed to be unaffected, such as Jason and Sophie's dodge powers and the team's various storage spaces.

Team Work Saw watched as they tested Jason's teleport and storage powers, Humphrey's teleport and storage powers, Belinda's storage power and Clive's power that was both a portal and a storage power. They looked on with growing incredulity as Jason and his companions moved on to testing other dimensional powers, like Neil's ability to draw everyone into a safe dimensional pocket and set off wide area damage, or Belinda's dimensional pit full of death tentacles. Outside of the teleport problems, their abilities seemed to be working normally.

"You realise that a lot of teams will hire someone with a portal and storage power in their set as auxiliary members, right?" asked Carlos, the leader of the other team. "They don't even make them fight and you have, what? Three people with both? Your travel utility is amazing."

"That's a point," Jason said, wandering over. "Do we need to check if our conventional travel powers are impacted? I don't have the cloud bus on me, but Shade has his vehicle forms and Onslow can do the giant shell thing. Stash can probably shape-shift into something, right? Anyone else?"

"I can take people with me when I fly around," Sophie said.

"I don't think we need to check any of that," Humphrey said. "We're on foot at the moment anyway. Carlos, why are you making that face?"

With no portal shortcuts, the two teams just made their way as a unit, quickly and cleanly eliminating any constructs they encountered and couldn't avoid. With the aura beacon stifling their senses, it was easier to stumble into enemies, with only Jason having any real range. Team Work Saw were the combat

mainstays of the group, their clean, efficient tactics ideal for eliminating ordinary opponents.

“Our teams seem to complement each other well,” Humphrey observed to his counterpart, Carlos. “Would you be open to further collaboration after this expedition is done?”

“We would,” Carlos said, looking surprised. “That’s not an offer we get a lot. We have one of the highest contract clearance rates in Rimaros, with a success percentage to match. Our contracts are looked down on as grunt work by other teams, though.”

“It’s teams like yours that do the real work of the Adventure Society,” Humphrey said. “You and your team are the truest adventurers of all of us.”

“I appreciate that,” Carlos said.

“He means it too,” Jason said through voice chat, listening in as he scouted ahead.

“Yeah,” Neil agreed. “Humphrey is cloyingly earnest.”

“Well, I like it,” Sophie said, also through voice chat. “He’s not afraid to voice a sincere opinion without coating it in snide, unlike some people.”

“Are you talking about me?” Neil and Jason asked at the same time.

“I think she was talking about you,” Neil said.

“No, it was you,” Jason retorted. “You’re the one who said something right before. I should have kept my mouth shut.”

“That’s been true since the day we met, but even killing you doesn’t get the job done.”

“You might want to tell your team leader to reconsider that collaboration,” Belinda confided in Henry, Team Work Saw’s big leonid. “We’re not what I’d describe as a professional outfit.”

“Who cares?” Henry asked. “You lunatics can portal in all the professionals you like.”

“Are you still going on about that?”

“Your team has three portal powers!”

“Humphrey’s is a teleport. That’s slightly different.”

“Not very.”

“Also, I can copy powers, so I can technically use a portal power as well.”

“I thought you could only do spells,” Neil said.

“My Mirror Magic ability lets me copy other abilities since it hit silver rank.”

“Oh, nice,” Neil said. “You’re really getting versatile. Hey, the other team is making those faces again.”

Ramona was carefully shifting shattered stone with her powers to clear a path.

“The constructs aren’t coming this way from wherever they’re being made,” she complained. “Why don’t we find some intact tunnels.”

“Fila isn’t finding the path the constructs use,” Sendira said. “For one thing, we don’t want to be fighting through them to reach wherever the clockwork kings are. For another, they are likely using a convoluted but clear path. Fila is finding us something more direct. Hopefully, that will help us find what we’re looking for and be gone before the adventurers stumble onto it.”

“And all the other teams out there are expendable?” Fila asked.

“Except for the ones who kidnapped Melody’s daughter,” Ramona pointed out. “As soon as the grab team had her, Sendira couldn’t activate the beacon fast enough. The members of the grab team that survived anyway. How many was that, Sendira?”

“We are going to war with the entire world,” Sendira said. “Sacrifices will always be necessary and we must be

unflinching.”

“And it’s essential for the war that Melody’s daughter be taken? It’s no secret she’s been using the fact that the boy the Builder wants dead is on her daughter’s team to expend precious lives and resources on this.”

“What Melody wants with the target is no concern of yours,” Sendira said. “Your place is to obey, not criticise in ignorance.”

Ramona finished clearing the way and they continued on.

Jason had been imagining some kind of lighthouse structure, but the beacon was located in a low, flat building remarkable only for being the least-damaged one they had come across. They found a set of large doors, discovering signs of fresh combat inside. Someone had fought their way in, taking out not just regular constructs but also emplaced defences. Giant metal arms, once presumably animate before their destruction, now dangled limply from the walls and ceiling. The damage was consistent with the powers they had seen from the converted, the silver flames they used leaving distinctive scorch patterns.

“The Purity people fought their way in,” Jason observed as the group walked slowly and warily through the mess. “I don’t think the Builder wants his allies here, picking over the bones of his fallen city.”

“That makes their decision to act so openly, this close to Rimaros, all the more curious,” Humphrey said. “What’s worth exposing themselves this much?”

“If the Purity loyalists are here to steal,” Clive said, “perhaps we should ask our resident thieves for insight. Ladies?”

“Don’t look at me,” Sophie said. “I did the running and punching and climbing up walls. All the planning that took place was Lindy’s doing.”

“Oh, you’re going to put everything on me?” Belinda said.

“If I was coming up with the plans, why did I always end up getting chased by dangerous people while you slipped away unnoticed?”

“Soph, you’re a stupidly gorgeous woman with silver hair who kicks people in the face when she gets mildly annoyed. What part of that suggests ‘slipping away quietly’ is the approach for you?”

“You did kick me in the face when we first met,” Jason said.

“You made my body wither and rot to the point that an alchemist and a healing priest struggled to keep me alive between them. And that was in a well-stocked alchemy clinic.”

“There were very fine people on both sides,” Jason said, his expression shifty.

“I think I’m going to kick you in the face again.”

“Or perhaps we get back to work?” Humphrey pointedly suggested. “Belinda, any ideas?”

NOT REALLY A RULES GUY

BELINDA PANNED HER GAZE OVER THE BROKEN BUILDER constructs, destroyed not by adventurers but by the Purity worshippers that were their ostensible allies.

“I can only guess at what they want,” she said. “Whatever they’re after, they think it will be gone if they wait for us to come and go. Something that the Builder doesn’t want them to take or, at least, didn’t give them permission to. It has to be something valuable enough that they’re willing to go against the wishes of what is—to our knowledge—the only ally they have. Valuable enough that they’re willing to risk exposure and significant losses by sending this much of a force this close to Rimaros at the same time as a significant adventurer expedition.”

She paced, absently tapping a finger to her lips as she looked around. The other adventurers remained silent, letting her think. Her eyes settled on the destroyed Builder constructs.

“Jason,” she said. “You told us that those altered Purity slaves had clockwork cores in them, right? The same things the Builder uses to create his minions?”

“That’s right,” Jason confirmed. “They’ve somehow erased the Builder’s influence and replaced it with Purity’s, but they have the same origin as the Builder cores.”

Jason’s eyes lit up as he realised what Belinda was thinking.

“Oh.” He shared a gaze with Belinda. “Oh, I bet that’s it.”

“Care to share with the rest of the group?” Neil asked.

“It’s no secret that the Purity church has as good as declared war on the rest of the world,” Jason said. “They’re preparing for a conflict, which means they need soldiers. While you were all operating out of Vitesse, you messed up their summoning of those messengers, but what if that’s only one way they’re bulking out their forces? What if they’re trying to co-opt the Builder’s method of mass-producing troops?”

“By using the modified cores,” Clive said. “Is that viable without the Builder’s cooperation? From the look of these destroyed Builder constructs, he and Purity’s unlikely alliance seems to be on the outs.”

“Which is why Purity’s people are willing to take such a big risk here. We know where clockwork cores come from. The Builder produces them with his clockwork kings,” Belinda said, picking up the narrative.

“And we came to this island to destroy clockwork kings,” Humphrey said.

“Exactly,” Belinda said. “We know that the Purity loyalists here belong to the Order of Setting Fire to Stuff or whatever they’re called. The ones that like to take things they consider unclean and purify them somehow, turning them into tools that they can use for themselves. What if they did that to a clockwork king to get the cores they have now? Maybe the Builder gave them one as part of whatever deal they made in the first place, but now they want to step up production. More clockwork kings means more cores, which means more fire-spitting mind-slaves for the Purity army. But what if the Builder cult won’t hand any more over?”

“Then they come for the ones here,” Clive concluded.

“But why wait until the island is crawling with adventurers to come get them?” Sophie asked.

“My guess would be they didn’t realise the clockwork kings were here,” Jason said. “If the Builder doesn’t want to hand them over, he wouldn’t tell them about it, assuming they even communicate at all anymore. And we have to assume that Purity has spies in Rimaros. They were a major church until

just a few years ago; they have to have informants and sympathisers left. Maybe those spies heard about an expedition to wipe out some clockwork kings and that's when they realised the kings were here for the taking."

"Which would be why they're here now," Belinda concluded.

"We thought this beacon was an escape plan," Humphrey said. "Instead, maybe it's cover while they try and beat us to the clockwork kings."

"How would they take them away?" Clive asked. "It doesn't seem like the Builder wants to hand them over, so they're unlikely to go quietly. Clockwork kings are gold rank."

"A question for later," Humphrey said. "Liara is out of voice chat range at the moment, so let's get the beacon down so we can fill her in, find our captured people and see about destroying those clockwork kings before Purity's people get a hold of them."

The two teams searched the building for the beacon projecting its disruptive aura across the island. The Purity adherents had trapped the approach, but Belinda disabled each one with a running commentary of their "amateurish efforts." As they drew closer to the source of the beacon, the intensity of the aura started to impact the adventurers. They all suffered from aura suppression and were affected by vertigo and headaches. Jason pushed his aura to the limits of his strength, barely managing to shield the others. One of the various traits his soul had picked up through its many traumas was the only reason he was able to resist.

Title: [Indomitable]

- Your repeated defiance in the face of more powerful enemies and willingness to sacrifice everything for a

cause has marked your soul. Your resistance to aura suppression is further enhanced and ignores rank disparity.

- Your aura signature has changed. Your unwavering resolve floods your aura and can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura. Allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression.

Jason's aura was an excellent tool for shielding his allies from aura suppression, but for all that his aura was powerful, its strength was not infinite. Against dozens of converted that could blend their auras into a single force, he barely managed to keep his own aura active. He couldn't shield his team from the purity-obsessed forces that combined their powers like a white supremacist Captain Planet. Only once enough of them died to diminish their collective aura was he able to push it back.

The aura produced by the beacon was stronger than a few dozen converted, but it wasn't an actively hostile force. The suppression was only a side effect of their proximity and this time Jason was able to push back enough to shield his allies. It was a borderline thing, though, leaving him able to do little more than walk and concentrate on projecting his aura.

As their minds cleared, Team Work Saw felt Jason's aura enveloping them at full force. All of the power and strangeness that he normally kept hidden were on full display and they all turned startled gazes on him. Even Jason's own team hadn't felt his aura truly pushed as far as it could go; they turned to look at Jason as his face was fixed in a determined grimace while he held off the aura.

"If we could hurry a little," he said through gritted teeth, "that would be really nice."

They moved on and tracked the beacon down in short order. It was a magical device similar to an orrery, hanging from the ceiling in a round room. It was made up of crystals linked by rods of brass and silver, with a large central crystal and around twenty more that got smaller the further they were from the middle. The central crystal was the size of a person's torso while the outer ones were no bigger than a fist. The larger crystals looked like natural formations while the smaller ones had been worked and faceted like gemstones. The crystals were in a variety of colours, from diamond-clear to muddy yellow-brown.

"Can we just smash it?" asked Henry, the leonid from Team Work Saw.

"We could," Clive said absently as he stood under the device, looking up as his eyes skittered across it. "The resulting magical detonation wouldn't inflict any physical damage, but it would probably feel like your soul was being plucked out and dropped into lava. It might not drive you insane and cripple your soul as your mind collapsed. Jason would probably be fine."

"In your own time, Clive," Jason said through gritted teeth. Being right next to the device was straining him to his limits. Clive worked with Belinda to examine the device using a few measurement tools pulled from their inventories.

"I don't think we can turn it off safely," Clive announced. "It's running through a cycle and interrupting the cycle wouldn't be good."

"How not good?" Humphrey asked.

"We'd basically be back to smashing it," Belinda said.

"How long will this cycle take, then?" asked Carlos, the leader of Team Work Saw. He was looking at the struggling Jason.

"Somewhere between half and a full day," Clive said.

"Minus the time it's been running already," Belinda added.

"Bugger that," Jason said.

He gestured and a line of darkness appeared on the ground. An archway of dark crystal, sparkling with internal lights. Shadows then filled the arch with star-speckled darkness.

“I didn’t think portals worked with this thing on,” Carlos said, gesturing at the orrery.

“Jason’s not really a rules guy,” Neil said.

“Not a portal,” Jason said. He made a spreading gesture and the archway grew larger, enough to accommodate the entire crystalline device. “Clive, unbolt that thing from the roof.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Clive said.

“You know me,” Jason grunted. “Bad ideas are kind of my thing.”

Clive looked uncertainly at Humphrey, who shrugged his shoulders.

“Alright,” Clive said. “Lindy, if you would?”

Belinda conjured a pair of socket wrenches on long poles, handing one to Clive. The orrery was attached to a metal plate that was bolted to the ceiling and they started removing the bolts. Humphrey moved under the device, his strength more than able to take its weight as the plate loosened.

“Are you sure?” he asked Jason.

“Yes,” Jason snarled. “Quickly, please.”

Once the device was free of the ceiling entirely, Humphrey lugged it through the archway. As soon as it was gone, the overwhelming aura vanished and Jason dropped to his knees in relief, his own aura fading away. He closed his eyes, wincing for only a moment before wearily getting back to his feet and following Humphrey through the arch.

Deep under the ruined city, three servants of Purity had made their way through the city’s even more ruined subterranean

infrastructure. They had to fight their way through a few silver-rank Builder constructs as they neared their goal before finally arriving in a vast and startlingly intact chamber. That a space this large and this deep had survived undamaged spoke volumes on the integrity of its construction.

Most of the city's underground had been constructed from brick, but this entire chamber was built from dark industrial metals, with heavy bolts and thick reinforcement beams on the walls and floor. The chamber was a combination refinery, forge and manufacturing plant, the size of an indoor arena. The high ceiling was blurred with smoke haze and shadow, with the only light source being the glow of molten metal.

Industrial silhouettes loomed in the dark, either the large machinery or the constructs that operated it. These constructs were larger than normal but not of the combat variety. These were utility machines, purely for servicing the operation that had not stopped even after the flying city fell from the sky.

A few more combat constructs moved to attack Sendira, Fila and Ramona, but there were not that many available. The completed constructs all immediately moved out into the winding network of mostly collapsed tunnels as soon as they were finished. Only a handful of freshly built ones were present, some still glowing with heat from the manufacturing process. The utility machines made no attempt to attack.

The trio didn't act personally, allowing the two gold-rank converted with them to handle the constructs. The essence users could sense the presence of three more gold-rank auras on top of the converted—the clockwork kings they had come looking for. The construct kings were themselves utility constructs that, like the others, did not move to attack. They were somewhere off in the dark, unreactive to the presence of the intruders. Two of the auras were distinct and easy to pinpoint, while the other was diffuse and seemed to fill the room.

Once the gold-rank converted dealt with the combat constructs, Sendira launched a glowing projectile into the air that flared into a bright light just before it would have struck

the ceiling. Motes of light burst out, then drifted around the room, illuminating everything.

They immediately spotted two clockwork kings, knowing where to look from their auras. They looked like clockwork skeletons, twice the size of a human, semi-covered in metal panels that only partly covered their internal mechanisms. Everything else in the room, from the walls to the vats of molten steel to the constructs it created, was crude and industrial in design. The clockwork kings, however, were works of art. Their metal panels were lacquered in white and decorated with brass embellishments. The internal mechanisms showing beneath were intricately crafted like the inside of a pocket watch.

Each clockwork king had four arms, all of which ended in hands with more fingers than people, each with many points of articulation. They were too delicate to be designed for fighting, although they would be dangerous to anyone below their rank if put to violent purpose. All the arms were busily assembling devices that looked tiny in the hands of the large kings. The components were being plucked from within the kings' own bodies: delicate pieces that were set together with swift but absolute precision.

“Where’s the third one?” Ramona asked, looking around. Now that there was light, she and her companions could see the room clearly.

“There.” Fila pointed.

The others looked and saw the arms of a construct king, but while they were moving around, they were not attached to the rest of the king but an incongruously crude piece of industrial machinery. They quickly realised that the reason the clockwork king’s aura was so scattered was that so was the king itself; without apparently impairing its function, the king had been disassembled and integrated into the infrastructure of the facility.

“That’s good,” Sendira said. “We’ll take the intact ones and the Adventure Society can destroy the other, happy that they’ve shut down the production.”

“And how are we going to take the intact ones?” Fila asked. “They’re docile now, but will they come quietly?”

“They will,” Sendira told her. “When the Builder cult delivered the first clockwork king to us, they also delivered a device to control it. It was tailored to that king only, but at the same time we purified the king, we purified the device. Now we control all its functions and simply turned the restriction off.”

“That’s good,” Ramona said. “We should move swiftly, then.”

“Agreed,” Sendira said. “I will...”

Sendira trailed off as the pervasive aura from the beacon they activated was cut off. It had been drenching the island, even into the subterranean depths, but suddenly, it vanished.

“You said that they wouldn’t be able to turn it off,” Ramona accused Sendira.

“They couldn’t,” Sendira told her. For the first time since arriving on the island, she showed an expression of uncertainty. “Even if they did find a way to shut it off, the aura would have diminished slowly. And if they’d destroyed the beacon, we would have felt an aura pulse that would have broken the minds of anyone too close to it. It shouldn’t be possible to just cut the aura off like that.”

“Maybe they portalled the beacon away,” Fila suggested.

“Portals won’t work even remotely close to the beacon, let alone right on top of it.”

“A storage space?” Ramona asked. “Could they stow the beacon away?”

“Perhaps,” Sendira said. “That won’t work for long, though. The beacon will swiftly destroy any kind of dimensional bag they put it in and be excreted from the dimensional space as it breaks down. As for a storage space coming from someone’s abilities, the beacon will have very bad effects on anyone who tries that. It might even kill them if they don’t take it back out.”

Sendira nodded to Ramona.

“I believe you are correct. Either it’s in a storage space or a dimensional bag, which is the only explanation for the aura just vanishing. It’s unsustainable, however, so the beacon will be active again soon. Until it is, however, our actions will be exposed. The gold-rank adventurers will have sensed our auras and know our location. We need to move quickly.”

“Are you sure the beacon will come back?” Fila asked. “Escaping the island won’t be easy without the cover of the beacon.”

“Of course it will,” Sendira said. “Anything capable of containing that beacon would have to possess inconceivable power.”

A COMPARISON HE COULD AVOID

THE MOMENT HUMPHREY APPEARED IN JASON'S SPIRIT REALM, he lost the protection of Jason's aura. The artificial aura of the beacon wasn't attacking him, but being so close to its source felt like his soul being dangled upside down in a raging river full of razor blades. He dropped the beacon, staggering as he pushed his own aura out to resist, but the extremely powerful gold-rank device was too strong and too close.

He took one unsteady step and then another. He was stumbling, which should have been quick, yet it felt like minutes passed between each one as his soul was scoured. Then another aura surged, pushing back the beacon's aura. It was Jason's aura yet somehow also not, coming not from a person but everywhere around him. Exhausted, Humphrey shakily walked across the gravel path of which he found himself and collapsed onto the nearby grass.

He had arrived at the outer reaches of Jason's spirit domain, emerging from an archway in the high, dark wall. A wide gravel path ran alongside the wall, with gardens on the other side of the path. Humphrey had fallen into a grassy strip between a winding path lined with blood-red flowers and a garden bed of black and white flowers. After sprawling out on his back, he stared up at the blue sky until Jason walked up to loom over him.

"I'm alright," Humphrey said.

"I know."

Jason seemed different from normal, which Humphrey had noticed he sometimes was in the strange realm. His usual frivolity was damped down and his presence became more imposing. Humphrey took the offered hand of his stern-faced friend, who pulled him to his feet.

“How long was it before you came in?” Humphrey asked.

“Just a few seconds.”

“It felt longer. I’m exhausted.”

“When your soul is in the wringer, the passage of time gets very hard to track accurately.”

“I guess you’d know,” Humphrey said. “Not the most pleasant specialty knowledge to have.”

“No,” Jason agreed.

Unlike in the outside where Jason had strained himself to shield the group, he now showed no trace of effort. The aura still protecting Humphrey came from the realm around him, yet it was definitely Jason’s aura. Or a more powerful version of it, which was an intimidating concept. The pair looked at the beacon, still where Humphrey had dropped it. It was similar to an orrery, with various crystals connected via metal rods. Humphrey dropping it had inflicted no damage, nor had the fall impeded its operation. Humphrey could faintly sense the aura it produced, thrashing against the aura suppressing it like a frenzied animal in a cage.

“It’s powerful,” Humphrey said. “Can this place contain it safely?”

“It’s powerful on the outside,” Jason said. “In here, it’s nothing.”

Humphrey felt an oppressive power and turned to look behind them. In the far-off centre of the realm loomed the ominous dark tower. In the air above the tower was the nebula eye, a monumental replica of the eye of Jason’s familiar. As well as Jason’s own eyes.

In Jason’s otherworldly realm, it was hard to judge distance, or perhaps distance was not the same fixed constant

it was outside. The tower was unquestionably far away and the eye was directly above it, yet Humphrey was filled with certainty that the eye was somehow much closer. Despite the amorphous nature of it, being an eye-shaped cloud, Humphrey could tell that it was looking directly at the beacon.

An aura pressed down from the eye onto the device, Humphrey feeling only peripheral contact with the eye's projected aura. Like the aura shielding him, it was Jason's aura but also not. This one was even more powerful, being far more vast and mysterious. Observing the aura projected by the eye was like looking into the water from a boat and glimpsing a fraction of a leviathan whose true vastness remained hidden in the depths.

The impact of the eye's aura on that of the beacon was immediate. Like a clockmaker disassembling a timepiece, the eye started taking the aura apart. One of the small outer crystals exploded, throwing out tiny shards. Most aura interactions were invisible, but with the explosion of the crystal, the beacon's aura spilled into the visible spectrum. White lights popped like fireworks over the beacon, then blue and orange light appeared as well. This was the aura of the eye rendered visible, a devouring cloud consuming the white lights. The white lights were broken into rainbow colours, as if refracting through a crystal, before vanishing.

More crystals exploded, producing more and more of the white lights, yet the blue and orange cloud had no trouble consuming them all. With every light that was turned into a rainbow before vanishing, the aura of the beacon grew weaker.

"What's going on in there?" Sophie's voice came through Jason's party interface.

"We're handling the beacon," Jason said. "Stay out there. We'll come out when it's dealt with."

"Voice chat works in here?" Humphrey asked.

"It's something I've been working on," Jason explained as they continued to watch the beacon's aura being devoured. "I've seen a lot of astral spaces, astral proto-spaces and the transformation zones I told you about. Most of them block any

form of communication, be that my party interface or even Shade communicating with his own bodies. Some allow it, though, and I've been unravelling the process by which that works. It's less a matter of power and more about understanding, although a certain threshold of power is necessary."

"Are you saying you can use your party interface across dimensional boundaries?"

"Only with my spirit realm," Jason said. "I'm looking to expand the utility going forward, but I still have a lot to learn about astral magic."

They continued to watch, Humphrey growing more uneasy at the concept of auras having component pieces. The potential revelations of what that meant for the soul were troubling.

"It's not a real aura," Jason said, despite Humphrey not asking. "False auras, like the motive spirit of a monster or a false aura from devices like this, are actually magical projections, not soul projections. The most powerful being in the cosmos couldn't take apart your aura like this unless you were stupid enough to let them into your soul where they could strip-mine it."

As they watched, the larger and more central crystals were exploding. The cloud continued to consume the resulting lights. Finally, the large central crystal erupted into fragmented shards, many of which were flung in the direction of Jason and Humphrey. Humphrey conjured his dragon wings to shield them, but the fragments stopped in the air as if they had struck an invisible gelatin wall and become embedded. They drifted back and fell onto the gravel, becoming inert.

Finally, all that remained of the beacon was the brass and silver rods that had connected the now-annihilated crystals, along with shard piles that had once been the crystals. Jason looked at them and the shards and rods all started to melt. Once they were nothing more than liquid pooled on the gravel, they seeped into the ground like water into dry earth.

Jason was looking at the spot the beacon had been with a grim frown.

“Jason, is everything alright?”

Jason looked up absently, distracted from his thoughts.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. No worries, mate. You should be able to contact Liara now.”

Humphrey did just that, quickly briefing the expedition leader. He glossed over the details of the beacon’s destruction and focused on the group’s postulation that the Purity worshippers were likely after the clockwork kings. Liara thanked Humphrey, directing their group to join the search for the missing adventurers, for which Jason’s expansive aura should be helpful.

“We should go and regroup with the others and get moving,” Humphrey said.

Jason nodded, still looking distracted.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“It would make sense if destroying that thing exhausted you. We can stop to rest if you need it.”

“No,” Jason said. “It wasn’t much of an effort.”

“It did seem easy enough,” Humphrey said. “If you don’t mind, though, I could use a rest myself. It was only a couple of seconds, but being in that thing’s aura felt like much longer.”

“Of course.”

Jason turned to gesture at a simple park bench that definitely hadn’t been there before. He and Humphrey sat, Humphrey looking at his friend with concern. Jason was different in this place. The vast and powerful aura permeating it wasn’t Jason’s exactly, but it also was. His aura power, Hegemon, always felt imposing when evoked; it was a sense that had only grown as Jason’s soul went through change after change.

Humphrey’s aura was likewise domineering, but his was the aura of a dragon: the natural ruler of wherever he happened to be standing. Jason’s was more like a celestial law. His aura

power came from the sin essence and, when projected, made the people within it feel as if Jason himself was the arbiter of right and wrong. The power of his aura essence reflected this, imposing a sin affliction on anyone that attacked Jason or his allies. To act against Jason within his domain was a sin and was punished accordingly. The sin afflictions that his aura power inflicted could not be resisted.

When Jason was just another silver-ranker, even with his aura possessing the strength it did, that was one thing. But in this place, Jason felt like a god. Even if the power felt nothing but benevolent to them, it left the team with a sense of unease each time they experienced it. The comparison to divinity was one Humphrey had subconsciously steered clear of, despite the obviousness of it, but it was no longer a comparison he could avoid. The beacon had been a gold-rank artefact, and not a lesser one. Jason's power in this realm was extremely abnormal.

Humphrey looked around at the spirit realm before his gaze settled on the giant eye above the tower. It looked no different than it had before, yet Humphrey felt certain it was no longer looking in their direction. Unlike Clive, Humphrey had never discussed with Jason the nature of the spirit realm after realising it was no ordinary dimensional realm power.

“Jason, that thing was far too powerful to just destroy safely.”

“Yes.”

“But not here.”

“No.”

“What is this place?”

Jason looked at Humphrey for a long moment, then nodded to himself.

“It's a combination of factors,” Jason said. “It started out as a power evolution for my storage space that created a realm where only myself and my familiars could enter. Then, after my body and soul went from dual-natured to a gestalt, the now

physical nature of my soul changed it. Other people could enter. Under certain conditions.”

“Conditions?”

“Other people’s souls instinctively recognise the power I will have over them here. Unless they trust me completely, they’ll be boxed out. Even if they want to risk it, their souls won’t let them. They can’t be forced in, even by themselves, any more than they can be into a hostile portal.”

Humphrey’s eyes went wide as an important puzzle piece fell into place.

“That was why you were so emotional after we came here,” he said. “And why you waited so long to show us. We’d been wondering.”

Jason nodded.

“There’s another factor,” Jason said. “The ability evolved a second time.”

“Like mine.”

“Not exactly,” Jason said. “You came by your second evolution honestly. Mine was triggered by significant external forces.”

“What kind of forces?”

“I was more or less using my soul as a lever to force a gap in reality shut. I was in a place where the foundational elements of the physical universe were so in flux that my power evolved to make fixing it possible. As a side effect, this place became close to what it is now. Along with... other changes.”

“Other changes?”

“Probably best if I didn’t say anything right now. It’s a delicate topic that I don’t want to rub in the face of certain powerful people.”

“Even diamond-rankers won’t overhear us here, right?”

“I’m talking people more powerful than that, Hump.”

“There isn’t anyone more powerful than... are you talking about gods?”

“Mostly. Gods. God-adjacent. Some of their more powerful servants. The Builder has this henchman who’s a total prick, but I think he’s in sky prison or something now.”

“You are going to get us struck down by the divine hand of vengeance.”

“That’s why we need to rank up,” Jason said cheerfully. “So we can slap them back if they get ornery.”

Humphrey looked at Jason incredulously. “You can’t rank up enough to fight gods.”

“Not with that attitude. Look, this power I probably shouldn’t tell you about. The practical effects are that it increases my power and presence in places that are connected to my soul. And I’m not sure what the upper limit on the power of it is—or if it even has one.”

“You’re connected to it, like you are to the cloud house,” Humphrey realised. “It’s why it always feels like you’re there.”

“Exactly,” Jason said, then a mischievous smile teased at his lips. “I’ve done my best to tamp that down while you and Sophie are sharing private moments.”

Humphrey went stiff, then forced himself to relax.

“So, this place is connected to your soul?” Humphrey asked. “Is that how you’re so powerful here?”

“This isn’t *connected* to my soul,” Jason said. “It is *my* soul. That’s why I’m all-powerful here. I don’t think anything could harm me here.”

“This is your soul? We’re inside your soul right now?”

“Yes.”

Humphrey felt like he should be incredulous, but it instead made complete sense. Suddenly, the strange feeling he had every time he came into Jason’s spirit realm made much more sense.

“You said you’re all-powerful here? That’s how you destroyed the beacon?”

“When others first became able to enter, I didn’t have the spirit domain power and was only bronze rank. Dawn speculated that a diamond-ranker might be able to resist my influence here. Now, though, I don’t think anything can. I’m pretty sure that if anyone tries to implant a star seed in me now, I can just let them and annihilate the thing once it’s here. Maybe a specially modified star seed, if someone tricked me into bringing it in. I’m pretty sure a regular one wouldn’t get the job done, even if it did get in here somehow. Or maybe I wipe the owner’s control and absorb it for my own use.”

“The way you did with that bridge and door you told us about.”

“Yes. I tried to do something similar with this beacon, but it was too weak and crude to endure the process. It didn’t maintain enough integrity to be absorbed as it broke down.”

“So, now you have leftover bits of beacon in your soul? Is there a magic mop for that?”

Jason burst into a laugh.

“You don’t need to worry about the residue affecting me. This place will digest it like food to strengthen my spiritual defences.”

Humphrey looked at his friend, remembering the carefree man he met in a waiting room of the Greenstone Adventure Society. Jason’s smile was still there, but there was a heaviness to it. The smile was genuine, but Humphrey wondered if Jason would ever regain the lightness of the past. There was too much weight on him now for that.

“We all take on burdens as we go through life,” Jason said. “It gets heavier for everyone.”

“Can you read my mind here?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Jason said. “I can read your face. You should avoid playing cards for money.”

“That’s not what Belinda told me.”

“Right before she took all your money?”

“Sophie made her stop. Eventually.”

“Are you two coming back out?” Sophie asked through voice chat. “Didn’t Liara tell us to get moving? I’m starting to get a little jealous.”

Humphrey frowned at Jason in confusion. “Jealous?”

“She sees the chemistry,” Jason said, pointing back and forth between himself and Humphrey. “I’d totally ship us.”

“What does a boat have to do with it?”

Jason shook his head.

“Oh, Hump.”

“Don’t call me Hump.”

PORTAL LOGISTICS

SUFFERING THE FULL EFFECTS OF THE AURA BEACON FOR ONLY a few moments had left Humphrey spiritually exhausted, but by the time he finished talking with Jason, he was ready to get back into action. While Humphrey knew his silver-rank recovery attribute was part of his rapid restoration, he suspected that Jason's spirit realm was also somehow contributing.

Translating the power and potential that every soul contained was the entire purpose of absorbing essences and advancing through the ranks. In Jason's spirit realm, however, there was no need for translation; Jason had the power on tap. Humphrey guessed that Jason utilised some of that power to help him, but he didn't ask if that was the case. Given that they were inside Jason's soul, the intimacy and trust of that act left Humphrey unsure if he'd be disappointed to just be imagining it.

As soon as Humphrey and Jason stepped out of the spirit realm, Jason spread his aura out to its fullest extent. He sensed the expedition's gold-rankers doing the same, searching for the captured adventurers. They were also looking for the Purity loyalists who they suspected to be going for the clockwork kings; they were likely underground already.

Jason had a variety of voice chat options and he opened a private channel for himself and the gold-rankers, Jana and Liara. They had the strongest aura senses by far and could coordinate their searches.

“I’m sensing something underground,” Liara said. “It’s muffled, but that makes sense. If the clockwork kings weren’t shielded from aura detection somehow, they would have been found in earlier sweeps of the island.”

“I’m not picking up any auras I recognise from the expedition members,” Jason said, “but I’ve touched on what I think might be a suppressed aura. It would make sense that they’re using suppression collars.”

“You can sense suppressed auras?” Jana asked.

“Dealing with aura suppression is kind of my thing,” Jason said. “I’m only sensing one suppressed aura, though. It’s possible that they split up the prisoners.”

“That makes sense,” Liara said. “The battle became very spread out and a handful of Purity worshippers managed to escape with captives. It makes sense that they scattered.”

“As I said, I’m only picking up on one aura,” Jason told her. “The others are too far for my senses to pick up or dead. They may have already escaped the island. That one suppressed aura is moving in the direction of the shore.”

“It looks like those vehicles they arrived in left while the beacon was active,” Liara said. “The scout teams watching the island managed to capture one of them, but the rest slipped away. They’re almost impossible to detect while under the water. They will likely return just long enough to extract their people.”

Switching from the private channel to the team leader channel, Liara directed Jason’s group to intercept the potential captive he had sensed. She would take a group and look for a path into the underground while Jana was in charge of searching for the remaining captives.

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “Those people you sensed. They’re heading for the shore?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Probably going to meet one of their magic submarines.”

“Let’s see if we can’t get ahead of them, then.”

“No worries.”

While portals were considered the most useful of all utility powers, the logistics of their use had always posed issues for adventurers. Along with range, portals had two critical limitations, the first of which was the need to have been to a portal destination. The other issue was the number and power of people who could use them. Jason was able to portal five silver-rankers and Clive four, while Humphrey could teleport up to three people in addition to himself. Fortunately, familiars didn't add to that burden.

Jason knew that his spiritual realm wasn't a workaround, as the people hidden away in his soul still consumed the portal's energy. With his full team in there, his portal would fail as soon as he tried to step through it.

Humphrey and Clive had developed routines to work around these limitations, incorporating Jason after they were reunited. Until they further ranked up their powers, they had to be creative with their portal logistics. Fortunately, their team had the unusual advantage of multiple abilities, allowing them to go through a process that was a little complicated but got the job done.

It started with Clive entering Jason's spirit realm. Belinda went with him, although only Clive was essential. Humphrey and Jason then flew into the air, Humphrey with draconic wings and Jason on wings of night. From the air, they had a better perspective on the island than even the tallest building offered. Their silver-rank visual acuity was excellent but not telescopic, so Humphrey pulled out a non-magical telescope.

This was a trick that Humphrey had picked up from Jason for extending the line-of-sight range of short-range teleportation, which had no cooldown. Humphrey picked out a spot in the direction Jason pointed and teleported himself and Jason there.

Clive and Belinda emerged at their destination, which was the top of a building overlooking the walls around the edge of the city. Clive and Jason both opened portals to the place they

had just left the group, allowing the rest to come through with capacity for one person to spare.

Much of the city wall had collapsed, giving access to the water via piles of rubble making rough ramps. Humphrey had chosen the spot because a relatively convenient water access point was nearby, making it a likely rendezvous point for the enemy with their transport.

Jason had already withdrawn his aura before being teleported. With his broad search, there was no question that their quarry had sensed his attentions, but there was no need to advertise the fact that they had moved into the path of the enemy. It wouldn't be hard to sense their group, but they didn't want to alert the Purity worshippers too early. The others all retracted their auras as well, but they were not stealth specialists and would only remain hidden outside a certain range.

"I'm going to go scout them out," Jason said. By reducing the range of his own senses, he would be able to track the enemy without being noticed himself unless they had their own aura-strength anomaly like Jason.

The two silver-rank members of the Order of Redeeming Light, Rhett and Jaime, were frogmarching their collared, gagged and hooded prisoner through the sloped and broken streets. Moving with the prisoner had slowed them down, and when the beacon coverage dropped, they hadn't yet escaped the island.

"I'm telling you, Sendira is using us as decoys," Jaime said. "We got screwed going along with this."

"You think I don't know?" Rhett asked.

"She was lying to our faces."

"Doesn't matter. We're in it now. All we can do is ride it out to the end."

“At least take the hood off the prisoner. We’ll move faster if he’s not stumbling along the whole time.”

“She said to keep the hood on.”

“Because she wants us to get caught. The idea is that when something goes wrong because she didn’t think it through, it all comes down on our heads. The transport might not even be waiting for us.”

“That’s unfortunate,” a voice said from behind them.

They both whirled around. A man stood only a few metres from them, having gotten closer than should have been possible. He wore blood-red combat robes and a cloak so dark, it seemed less like fabric than a void wrapped around him. Inside the deep hood was a pair of strange eyes eerily watching them.

They couldn’t sense any aura from the man. Their eyes told them he was real, but their other senses said he was not, leading to an unnerving dissonance. They couldn’t even smell him, which their silver-rank olfactory senses certainly should have. There were several potential reasons for the disconnect. One was a stealth specialist while another was a projected illusion. Then there was the worst-case scenario.

“I’m not a gold-ranker,” he assured them. “My name is Jason Asano.”

The two Purity worshippers stirred.

“You’re the one the Builder wants dead,” Jaime said. “We were told you were on the island.”

“We were told to kill you if we got the chance,” Rhett added.

“Here you are, then,” Jason. “It’s your lucky day.”

Jaime and Rhett shared a look, both of their expressions flashing uncertainty.

“Why does the Builder want to kill you?”

“He tried to take my soul one time, so I took this astral space of his. Well, someone else took it first and I stopped him

from taking it back. It's all a bit complicated. That's even before the magic door I stole, which is a whole other thing. Are you blokes familiar with multiverse theory?"

Jason pushed the hood back off his head, revealing his face.

"Look," he told them. "We could fight. I'm pretty sure that would go badly for you, but you have a hostage, so who knows? But you seem like good, clean-living blokes. Maybe we could make a deal."

"What kind of deal?" Rhett asked.

Jaime turned to glare at him.

"What?" Rhett asked. "We should at least hear him out."

"Definitely not," Jaime said.

"Why not?"

"We're part of the Church of Purity."

"And whose fault is that?" Rhett asked. "Hey, Rhett, let's give up the amphora business and join the church of religious crackpottery."

"That is not how I described it."

"Well, you should have."

"I know that now. But we're in it, and this guy is definitely not pure."

"Well, I don't care. Do you want to fight him? I'm willing to bet he has a half-dozen friends stashed nearby too."

"Then why would he make a deal?"

"Maybe he finds us intimidating."

"Yeah, I bet spooky blood-robe guy finds us terrifying."

"Well, maybe if someone let me wear my pointy hat."

"That hat is not intimidating."

"It is so. And it's magical."

"It stores beverages!"

“Well, he didn’t know that!” Rhett said, gesturing at Jason. That was when they realised that Jason was no longer there.

“Where did he go?”

They looked around and realised that not only had Jason vanished while they were arguing, but so had their prisoner.

“How did he do that?”

“The tricky part was some very delicate aura suppression to see if I could gradually remove the prisoner from their perception without them noticing while they were distracted,” Jason said.

The prisoner, de-hooded and ungagged, was being treated by Neil.

“And you just let them go?” Sophie asked Jason.

“I bet you left something behind, though, didn’t you?” Belinda asked.

Jason flashed a grin.

“There’s a pretty good chance someone will spot the Shade bodies in their shadows, but they don’t have any gold-rankers. We might be able to learn something useful before that point.”

“You aren’t worried about your familiar being caught?” asked Carlos, the leader of the other adventuring team.

“One of the most beneficial aspects of my excess bodies is that they are expendable,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “The ability to send them into dangerous places is quite valuable.”

“I made the mistake of not using Shade to scout the dangerous places in the past,” Jason explained. “When Shade and I had only just started working together, me and the team found ourselves standing over what we later discovered was a massive hidden base for the Purity church and the Builder cult. I let myself be talked out of scouting it out and didn’t

understand the extent of Shade's remarkable abilities yet. I don't want to make that mistake again."

In the depths under the city, Sendira, Fila and Ramona were in the massive forge room. In front of them was a pair of subdued clockwork kings, the device Sendira brought to control them having worked precisely as intended.

"What now?" Ramona asked. "The aura shielding on this chamber is probably damaged and not fully hiding us. Even if it is, the gold-rankers will sense us the moment we leave it. They have to be looking, now the beacon is down."

"Yes," Sendira agreed. "The likelihood of their having realised our objective is high."

"Even if Ramona digs us a path out that the adventurers can't follow," Fila said, "our chances of escaping this island with gold-rankers coming after us are as good as nil. What great plan does Melody have for getting us out of here? Or didn't she think things through this far?"

"As a matter of fact," Sendira said, "she did."

Sendira led them to the chamber doors and outside the aura shielding the room provided. The clockwork kings lumbered behind them. In the hallway outside, Sendira took out a magical object; a silver pyramid small enough to rest in her hand. She set it on the ground and twisted the top of the pyramid to remove it. Inside was a crystal that started glowing silver-blue when Sendira touched a finger to it.

As Sendira replaced the cap over the crystal, a powerful false aura was projected from the pyramid. The aura beacon was nothing like the one that had blanketed the island, being far less powerful and not disrupting other auras.

"Great," Ramona said. "Your plan is to make it easier for the gold-ranker to find us."

"No," Fila said, looking at the device. "I know what that is."

“What is it?” Ramona asked.

“It’s a portal beacon,” Fila said. “All portal abilities have different secondary effects. Some can target portals in places they’ve never been, so long as there is an aura-based target marker to home in on.”

“The only portal user we have in our branch of the order can’t do that,” Ramona pointed out. “We also don’t have a gold-ranker strong enough to portal these clockwork kings.”

A portal flared into being and Sendira ordered the clockwork kings to move through it.

“Fortunately,” Sendira said, “Melody is not as short-sighted as you.”

IT WON'T BE A GOOD REASON

THE SEA OF STORMS HAS NO SHORTAGE OF SMALL, uninhabited islands. One such island was a small scrap of land that was periodically scoured by the magical storms that passed through the region, stripping the land bare except for a gully where hardy magical plants had managed to hold on.

The plant life that survived was not particularly exceptional. Examples of all of it could be found throughout the Sea of Storms, frequently being cultivated in specialty farms. What it did do, though, in the jungle-filled gully on the otherwise barren island, was make anything going on inside very difficult to detect. When operating anywhere even remotely close to Rimaros, this was a valuable asset. The senses of gold-rankers were bad enough, but with diamond-rankers active, any slip could be costly.

Three people stood in the gully, one of which was a gold-ranker, Esteban Galo. The others were Melody and Laront, the leadership of the Order of Redeeming Light's Sea of Storms contingent.

"Your name is Laront and his name is Laurent?" Galo asked. "I can see that becoming confusing."

"Best he's not here, then," Melody said.

"His real name isn't Laurent; he chose that to annoy me," Laront told him. "He wasn't fool enough to use my actual name, but it's close enough. Just call him Killian or, better yet, make this the end of your dealings with him. He has a habit of

using, exploiting and betraying the people he works with or for.”

“Then why do you work with him?”

“Because he is my brother.”

“You’re a human and he’s an elf.”

“My father was an elf and my mother a human. The Church of Fertility allowed them to have children and I was fortunate enough that my father’s impurity was purged to produce me. They went in the other direction for my brother, with predictable results.”

“I thought he looked like that because of some power he had. You’re saying it’s because he’s an elf?”

“Killian’s failings are many and they are painted on his face,” Laront said. “Where is he now?”

“Early in the monster surge, something spooked him enough that he paid very well to leave the Sea of Storms. He specifically asked me not to tell you where and, since he’s the one paying for this, I won’t.”

Laront nodded.

“He always had a knack for finding what fed specific appetites,” Laront mused, triggering a flash of unhappiness on Galo’s expression. “My apologies. I meant no offence.”

“I just want it done,” Galo said. “The Adventure Society has every portal specialist on a tight leash, so it took considerable concessions to make this possible.”

Melody and Laront shared a wary look. An unhappy gold-ranker could go very poorly for them. Gold-rankers weren’t used to having their activities monitored, let alone controlled. There were exceptions, such as the Sapphire Crown guild that worked directly for the royal family, but even their gold-rankers were used to a rich amount of liberty. Even in a monster surge, gold-rankers were rarely impinged upon as they were leaders who themselves knew best how to contribute. There were some abilities, however, that were too

useful to not make the most efficient use of during a monster surge. Portal powers were at the top of that list.

The logistical issues that made portals trouble for teams like Jason's meant that gold-rank portal users were at an absolute premium. Monster surges meant that rapid deployment of forces was frequently critical, allowing entire silver-rank expeditions to be deployed at need. Compared to that, a silver-rank portal user could only deploy bronze-rankers in force, frequently unable to portal even their own teams in their entirety.

Silver-rankers who didn't have portal abilities close to reaching gold were more frequently employed to deliver critical resources. This was especially true for those who, like Jason and Clive, also had storage powers. While dimensional bags generally didn't count against portal capacity, too many of them passing through could sometimes destabilise a portal.

The two Purity worshippers were fully aware that Galo was not exaggerating his difficulties. Not only did he need to carve out the time to help them but also do so without anyone tracking his activities. Doing all that for members of their church was a significant risk for him, which spoke to just what Killian had offered the man for his service.

Laront had no idea what price his brother had paid to convince Galo to aid the Church of Purity. He only knew what Killian had asked of Laront in return for doing so—a price that came as a surprise. Laront and Melody were ambivalent about the Builder's desire to have Asano killed, but Laront's brother wanting the same thing was a different matter.

The alliance with the Builder was rapidly coming apart, with neither side showing any particular malice or care. While the monster surge had already gone longer than some and showed little sign of abating, it would continue only for a handful of weeks more, perhaps a couple of months at most. With that, the Builder forces would retreat to the astral, having plundered what they could over the course of their invasion.

At that point, the Builder's interest in Pallimustus would be over while the God of Purity's preparations would finally

come into the light. The aftermath of the combined monster surge and Builder invasion would see Pallimustus at its weakest, which would be Purity's time to rise.

The Builder cult likewise had little more use for the Purity worshippers. If they managed to kill Asano, that was all well and good. If not, Purity's worshippers taking the clockwork kings was already the greater transgression. It would be far from the first time one had taken from the other, going back to the Builder's own attempts to kill Jason.

An entire contingent of Purity priests had been defiled by clockwork cores, turning them into converted. It wasn't even the only instance of the Builder using his allies in this way. The cannibalistic nature of Purity and the Builder's alliance was why Melody had not hesitated to seize the clockwork kings.

Compared to the Builder's absent ire, the ill-will of Killian or the gold-ranker they were dealing with would be a more pointed threat. Killian might only be silver rank, but the way he wormed into the grimmest corners made him a nebulous threat if he turned on them—which he certainly would, should it benefit him. Unfortunately, Laront had needed those connections.

Oddly, Galo was the lesser threat. They were less concerned with his gold-rank power than with what he would tell the authorities if connected to the order. Galo's necessity to reliably extracting the clockwork kings had forced Melody and Laront to let him see more of their operation than they liked. Nonetheless, they had taken what precautions they were able to.

They were not foolish enough to fully expose themselves. Their current location was part of their diligence in containing information. Even what members of the order knew was carefully controlled. That had led to an amount of dissatisfaction with the current leadership, but that was an issue Melody had been working on for some time. The operation on the island that was once the Builder's flying city was the culmination of those efforts.

Melody and Laront both felt relief when the aura beacon signal in Galo's hand started glowing and he opened a portal. Two clockwork kings ducked through it, followed by Sendira, Fila and Ramona.

"Who is this?" Ramona demanded, looking at Galo. He focused his gaze and gold-rank aura on her and she wilted. Laront handed him an envelope and he walked away, toward one end of the gully. Melody led the others in the opposite direction.

One of Shade's bodies was able to navigate the underground much better than Jason, his insubstantial form easily circumventing obstructions. He eventually arrived outside the forge chamber and Jason shadow-jumped through him. Shade vanished into Jason's shadow as he walked into the chamber. Liara was already inside, looking around at the operations that carried on, unperturbed by the intruder's presence. Jason walked up to stand beside her.

"The other prisoner freed herself?" Liara asked. The aura blocking of the chamber made Jason's communication power spotty, so Liara only had the basics of the ongoing operation.

"The Purity worshippers who took her were badly injured when they got away," Jason told her. "Some constructs stumbled onto them while they were waiting to rendezvous with one of their extraction vehicles and she got away while they were fighting. She managed to get the hood off her head, but she was still collared. All she could do was run until Jana found her."

"And no sign of the other one?"

"Actually, one of the teams has a good tracker. He was able to find where they boarded one of their vessels. Signs are that he was still alive at the time."

"Which of the prisoners was it?" Liara asked.

"Gibson Amouz."

“Dammit. That’s my husband’s cousin. He’s capable enough but has something of a courage problem. His father has been pushing him during the monster surge to toughen him up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not like I’d be happy, whoever it was. The thing I wanted above all else was to not lose anyone.”

“They want him alive for a reason. It won’t be a good reason, but it’s better than dead.”

“And if they do to him whatever it is they do to purify things?”

“Then he’ll be properly messed up,” Jason said. “But you can come back from properly messed up. There’s a guy in our group, Carlos. He’s leader of the other team you paired us with, but he got me thinking about another Carlos I know. He’s a priest of the Healer that specialises in soul damage. Works with people who had star seeds shoved into them. He helped dig me out of the kind of hole not everyone escapes, even though I was kind of a prick to him. If there’s a way back from whatever the Order of the Redeeming Light does to people, someone like him either knows it or is our best chance at figuring it out.”

Liara turned her gaze from the industrial processes still working to produce constructs and looked at Jason. After a moment, she nodded.

“I’ll look into that,” she said.

“So, what about all this, then?” Jason asked, gesturing broadly at the room around them. “You want me to do the trashing? I have a familiar with resonating force beams that’ll slice this place up like baklava. I’d appreciate you handling the clockwork king if it pulls itself together, though. It looks like they used it for parts, but its aura is still intact, if a bit all over the place.”

“The Magic Society will want to study this place and the clockwork king.”

“I say we trash it anyway. They won’t research anything in here fast enough to help before the Builder conflict comes to an end. The Builder is done in the Storm Kingdom anyway, making this place a horror factory that some prick will want to exploit. Let’s destroy it and go work on getting your cousin-in-law back.”

Liara stared at the room for a long moment before nodding.

Another uninhabited island in the Sea of Storms was an unremarkable mountain jutting out of the water, little more than a rocky hill. Beneath the surface of the water, however, was a submerged tunnel leading into a complex hollowed out of the mountain. The interior proved that the unremarkable, uninhabited exterior was a lie.

A vessel looking like a flat whale moved through the tunnel and surfaced at a large submarine dock, alongside several identical vessels. The bow of the vessel opened up and Melody walked out onto a ramp, followed by Laront and Sendira. They were trailed by the two clockwork kings, with Ramona and Fila bringing up the rear. For an internal space, the submarine dock was very large, with a lot of open space currently going unused. The facility was designed for a much larger force than the Order of Redeeming Light currently possessed.

There was a large group of order members assembled at the top of the ramp, a rare convergence of the various cells the order normally scattered across the region. They were gathered into clusters by group, Ramona and Fila hurrying to join their own people. They were each the second-in-command of their cells and immediately reported to their leaders underneath privacy screens.

Standing next to Melody, Sendira looked around the leaders of each cell, no few of whom were looking at Melody. Their gazes ranged from assessing and reserved to overtly

hostile. Melody, for her part, was casually talking with Laront while directing some of her own people to take away the clockwork kings with the device Sendira handed over.

Four of the leaders shared looks and stepped forward, approaching Melody. She turned to face them, her expression unconcerned and slightly confused. Her once silver hair and eyes were now white and pale grey—human colours instead of the celestine ones she'd been born with. Those eyes narrowed with wariness as she addressed the other cell leaders.

“Is there something you'd like to discuss?”

BAIT AND SWITCH

HIDDEN INSIDE A MOUNTAIN WAS THE ORDER OF REDEEMING Light's submarine dock. There was a rare gathering of the order's local forces and four of the cell leaders were confronting their overall leader, Melody Jain, in front of everyone. She looked slightly confused as she looked at the other leaders. Her second-in-command, Sendira, stood beside her, as did the church representative to the order, Laront. Melody addressed the cell leaders.

“Caitlyn. Heston. Marika. Elise. Is there something you have to say?”

“We need to discuss the direction you are taking operations here in the Sea of Storms,” Marika said.

“I assume your intention is to congratulate me for the success of the operation,” Melody said. “Two clockwork kings in our possession and a clean extraction.”

“Clean?” Marika asked, her expression incredulous. “We spent years establishing secure locations and infrastructure within the Sea of Storms, without the Storm Kingdom ever catching wind of us. Months developing operational readiness, all in preparation for the monster surge. Once it began, we worked painstakingly to suborn fortress towns and the essence users they contained so they could become purified converted. You just sacrificed two-thirds of that force and exposed the scope and nature of our operations in the course of a single day. And don't tell us this was about the clockwork kings. You only found out about them chasing after your daughter.”

Anger crossed the face of Melody's second, Sendira, but Melody gestured her to silence before she spoke.

"That is only the beginning," Heston said, jumping into the gap left as Sendira failed to defend her leader. "Every cell here lost people today. Every one."

"Including my own," Melody said. "Sacrifices must be made."

"You think that losing your own people inspires confidence in your leadership?" Elise asked.

"I am the leader," Melody said. "This position was assigned to me. Your confidence should be in that. Or do you doubt the wisdom of the church's leadership?"

"We have been here for a long time," Caitlyn said. "Away from the church's eyes, we are concerned that you have lost sight of the true path."

"I am the church's eyes," Laront said. "Are you suggesting that I have been blinded?"

"We all know that you and Melody work very closely together," Heston said. "Perhaps that closeness has caused you to lose the perspective that a little distance would offer."

Laront narrowed his eyes.

"Be extremely cautious about the accusations you make," he warned. "Your soul belongs to Purity, but the means by which it comes to him remain an open question."

"Are you threatening me, priest?"

"Yes. Never forget that you were filth that I picked up, washed off and gave the privilege of serving the most pure. If you want to be returned to the garbage pile, I can quite readily have you chopped up and composted."

"Boys," Melody said in the lightly scolding tone of a mother almost, but not quite, at the limits of her tolerance. "Whatever contention there is between us, remember that we are ultimately one, under the pure god. We might disagree inside, but the enemies are outside."

Despite having stepped forward to challenge Melody, Caitlyn, Elise and Marika all nodded their agreement. Looking slightly sheepish, Laront and Heston took both a literal and figurative step back.

“Now,” Melody said. “Since there seems to be tension born of dissatisfaction with how this operation has been conducted, let’s discuss it and see if we cannot clear the air. Firstly, I would like to address the issue of expending the lives of our members and the bulk of the pure converted on this operation. The loss of order members is, of course, unfortunate. It is, however, an unfortunate necessity.”

“So you say,” Caitlyn said. “This operation was reckless.”

“The operation was essential,” Melody said. “If our goal was to collect a small force of pure converted, we would have taken them and left already. Do you truly believe that the years, people and resources the order has poured into this region are worth a paltry contingent of cannon fodder?”

Caitlyn met Melody’s gaze, but not steadily.

“Of course not,” she said.

“Our goal,” Melody announced to the group at large, “is not to collect a small force or even to build an army. It is to give the church the means to not just build an army but to keep building armies. This world is unclean. So unclean that we have been forced to work with a taint like the Builder just to prepare it for cleansing. The challenges ahead are great and our enemies overwhelming. We cannot hedge our bets or take half measures. Only boldness can light this world’s path out of the darkness.”

Melody gestured at the clockwork kings.

“These are the key. The answer to what brought us here and the next step forward. They are worth more than any number of pure converted. And yes, they are worth some of our lives. All of our lives, if that sacrifice delivers a weapon to our god, that will help him purify this world. We had only one chance to seize this key and that is exactly what we did. What

we have achieved today came at a cost, yes, but it is the price of triumph.”

“These are all very fine ideals,” Marika said, “but are you truly holding to them, Melody? We didn’t find out about the clockwork kings because we were looking for them. What we were looking for was a way to get our hands on your daughter and only stumbled on news of the kings because she was going after them. Would you have risked raiding the island if she wasn’t there?”

“I would,” Melody said. “My daughter’s presence was irrelevant.”

“Is that so?” Elise asked. “Then why was almost half of our force on the island pushed into a confrontation to snatch her and bring her back? The most costly conflict, all for one person.”

“Things are not as you say they are,” Melody said, although her voice lacked its previous certainty, emboldening her challengers.

“You can say what you like,” Heston said, “but words are easy. The proof is in your actions. So many of our forces have failed to return, but your daughter is being carried to us as we speak.”

One of the submarines surfaced at the dock and Heston laughed.

“Perfect timing,” he said. “Let us see the degree to which Melody places her desires over the order’s ideals.”

The front of the submarine opened up and voices emerged, mid-conversation.

“...just a piece of cardstock with information printed on it, folded into thirds. It’s a great way of efficiently disseminating information and you can print a bunch of them cheaply.”

“And some guy from Vitesse gave it to you?”

“Yeah, he was hunting some energy vampire. I have no idea how someone like that got involved in the amphora business...”

Rhett and Jaime came wandering out of the submarine, onto the ramp that led up to the dock platform. They stopped, their conversation trailing off as they noticed all the people staring at them.

“Uh, hey, boss,” Rhett said. “Um, that Asano guy took our prisoner.”

“He was really sneaky,” Jaime added.

Sendira pinched the bridge of her nose, letting out a quiet groan.

“You lost her daughter?” Heston asked incredulously.

“Her?” Jaime said. “We grabbed a guy. What’s this about a —”

“That’s enough,” Melody told them. “Just go join the others.”

Rhett and Jaime awkwardly made their way up the ramp, under the gaze of the order’s leadership. They joined the rank and file of Melody’s cell, standing off to the side.

“I’m afraid you got the wrong vessel,” Sendira told Heston. “The vessel containing our primary target was directed to take extra precautions in returning to the dock, so it will be the last to arrive.”

There was an awkward silence amongst the leaders as they waited for the last vessel to arrive. Their various cells whispered amongst themselves, some more quietly than others.

“...and they called me mad, which I thought was terrific.”

“Rhett, you’re being too loud.”

“Oh, thanks, pal.”

“I’m not judging you. I’m saying everyone can hear you and now they’re all looking at us again.”

Rhett and Jaime looked around at the group, pointedly not meeting Sendira’s gaze.

“Oh, look!” Jaime said as he pointed at the water. “The last vessel is here.”

Their shoulders slumped with relief as all attention turned to the newly arrived submarine.

“You need to learn to modulate your voice,” Jaime whispered.

“You know I’ve never been good at talking without breathing.”

“Have you been doing the exercises I showed you?”

“Yes, I’ve been doing the exercises.”

“Regularly?”

“We’ve been very busy. You know Sendira always makes me wash the clockwork king. Do you know how hard it is to degrease that thing?”

“You worship the God of Purity. You can’t get a good detergent?”

“I had a guy smuggling crystal wash out of the city, but he said someone bought up all the excess supply.”

They noticed Sendira staring at them again and fell silent.

Another vessel docked and two more people emerged from it. This time, only one was a member of the order, while the other was hooded, collared and shackled, arms bound behind his back. The order member shoving him up the ramp was a fierce-looking woman with pale skin, red hair and green eyes.

“Thank you, Kelleigh,” Melody said as the woman delivered the prisoner to stand in front of the assembled leaders. Kelleigh then joined the rest of Melody’s cell.

“Where’s your prisoner?” she asked Rhett and Jaime quietly.

“That Asano guy took him,” Jaime said.

“What did I tell you when we split up?”

“Shush,” Rhett said, pointing to where Sendira was removing the prisoner’s hood.

“Who in Purity’s name is this?” Heston asked.

“Isn’t Purity’s name Purity?” Rhett asked, earning him an elbow jab from Kelleigh.

Fortunately for Rhett, the leadership’s attention was on the shackled man in front of them.

“Meet Gibson Amouz,” Melody said. “Son of Lord Cassin Amouz and heir to the seat of House Amouz.”

“This isn’t your daughter,” Elise asked.

“No,” Melody said. “It isn’t.”

“But the whole point of the operation was to grab your daughter,” Caitlyn said.

“This does seem to be an idea you have all latched on to,” Melody said. “I’m really not sure where it came from. Sendira, have you been telling people we were going after my daughter?”

“No, Melody. I only ever referred to the target as the target, for operational security purposes. I became aware, during the operation, that the order members with me believed the target to be your daughter. As acquiring the target was outside of their designated tasks, I declined from correcting them.”

“I think I’m starting to see why you all have questions regarding my priorities,” Melody said. “You believed that I was using the order’s resources to bring in my daughter. This would be inappropriate, of course, for while I would certainly like to see my daughter redeemed, the order’s purpose cannot be subjugated to any personal agenda. Where you got the idea that I would do so, I cannot imagine.”

The expressions of the four cell leaders that had stepped up to question Melody’s authority ranged from carefully controlled to poisonous, but they all realised that they had been played. Melody had artfully manipulated them into challenging her in front of all their people on spurious grounds, meaning any further challenges would be launched from shakier ground.

For her part, Melody continued to twist the knife.

“Young Master Amouz, here,” she explained, “is heir to House Amouz, as previously mentioned. House Amouz controls or has an interest in more than half of the mining operations in the Sea of Storms, including the bulk of high-rank mineral acquisition. The reason we have put such time and care into capturing him—in the course of which we discovered our new clockwork kings—is for the next stage of our plans.”

“Building constructs,” Marika said.

“Precisely,” Melody said. “Pure converted are all well and good, but they also come with certain problems. One is the need to obtain essence users as material, and the other is that their capabilities are rather lacking in variety. Building our own constructs will alleviate this, and the materials required for each construct are both cheap and easy to obtain, relatively speaking.”

Melody’s speech was for the benefit of the rank and file, who were usually given more orders than explanations. The cell leaders knew exactly what needed to be done and why.

“The problem with setting up a construct factory,” Melody continued, “is that while the materials for individual constructs are unexceptional, the facility itself requires quite an initial outlay that is rather more extravagant. Young Master Amouz, here, and the family secrets he will soon be sharing, is the solution to our problems in this regard.”

THAT KIND OF POWER CAN BE LONELY

JASON AND CLIVE WERE IN THE WATERFALL ROOM IN JASON'S cloud house. The walls were still covered in writing boards and they were looking at a section where Clive had scrawled small, densely packed notes.

"I think enhancing your portal ability might actually be viable," Clive said. "The key is using the cloud constructs from your cloud flask as the medium. Boosting the power would wreck you very quickly, but I believe the cloud flask can handle it. It may not be higher rank than you, but it's a growth item, so the potential is there, and it's extremely robust."

"But?" Jason prompted.

"On the astral magic side, I think we have everything covered. It's your instinctive understanding of astral forces, along with the items you've absorbed, that are making this possible, so leveraging them is the easy part."

Jason looked at the walls covered in months of painstaking work by himself and now Clive.

"That was the easy part?"

"The trick is integrating the enhancements into the cloud flask. This is trickier than just shoving some materials into the flask to get the desired result. We'd need to shove you in there, and I don't think that's the way we want to go."

"We need to leverage the bond between myself and the cloud flask," Jason said.

“Yes. We need to develop some manner of interface that creates a very specific exchange through that bond, and this is where my understanding falls short. I’m not too humble to claim that my understanding of artifice is rather good, given that it’s outside my specialty field, but we are way beyond my level of expertise. Not only is a cloud flask breathtakingly complicated by even growth item standards, but you’ve made modifications. Not just the shoving-stuff-in-it kind, but the way you’ve connected to it.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “There’s the spirit domain, plus I turned it into an item set with my sword and amulet.”

“I’d like to know more about the item you used to do that. I should learn as much about it as I can.”

“Sure,” Jason said as a pair of cloud chairs rose up for them to sit in. “It was called a soul-imprinting triune, and it was unranked, like an essence.”

“Where did you get something like that?”

“You know my looting power gives me additional rewards from especially dangerous and powerful enemies.”

“Yes. It replaced the power that gave you odd missions, yes?”

“The quest system, yeah. My own private Adventure Society. Anyway, I was in this city, buying time for evacuation before a monster wave started—this was right before I ranked up to silver. I killed a gold-rank monster and looted the—”

“You killed a gold-rank monster?”

“More like finished it off after it crossed a dimensional boundary the hard way. In fairness, it killed me first.”

“You didn’t tell us about this when you were talking about what you did over there.”

“I’m sure Farrah told you more than I did,” Jason said.

“She said there were some bad days.”

“This was one of those. It was a big city with a lot of innocent people and not enough time to get them out.”

Jason smiled, forcing himself from dropping into a funk.

“We helped a lot of people those few days,” he said. “Yes, a lot died, but there’s a lot of people who didn’t because of people who stepped up. I spent a lot of time dwelling on the leaders of the organisations I dealt with over there and how generally crappy they were, but most of the rank and file were basically adventurers, doing their best to help people. Fighting hard and making sacrifices. Arabelle says I should focus on that when I’m thinking about those times. It helps, I guess.”

“You don’t have a lot of background on the triune, then, if you looted it from a monster. Let’s go through what you know about its effects.”

Jason and Clive continued to discuss their project until it was time for Jason to make lunch.

“I’m not sure we can move forward without consulting someone who understands cloud flask construction,” Clive said. “Unfortunately, that’s extremely rare. I’ve only ever heard of diamond-rankers making them.”

“Emir is probably our best bet there,” Jason said. “He knows who created both of our flasks.”

“It will probably have to wait until after the surge is over, then,” Clive said. “It’s still hard just getting a water link slot. As for Emir showing up in person, I think there’s still a standing order for his arrest.”

Jason put on a big spread of salads and sandwiches because the cloud house was unusually full. His friends were always busy, even Taika, who had been going out on delivery runs to low-danger zones with other bronze-rankers. Travis was holed up on some kind of project, frequently with Farrah, which they had thus far refused to tell anyone the details of. Dawn had been out of town since the battle with the Builder cities, as she still had valuable guidance to offer places where the Builder was an imminent threat. She had just arrived back in Rimaros, however, and quietly paid a visit to the cloud house.

Today, everyone happened to be free at the same time, if only for a few hours, and it was a full house. Dawn was sitting next to Jason at a long table covered in food as everyone tucked merrily in. She watched, bemused, as she enjoyed a social gathering unlike any she had experienced in many centuries.

“You have a talent for making people overlook the difference in rank,” she said to Jason. “Even modulating my aura to put people at ease, they are rarely so unreserved around me.”

“Sounds lonely,” Jason said. “But that was why the World-Phoenix sent you instead of some lackey to ride herd on me, right?”

“Yes,” she said. “I was uncertain, at first. Inhabiting a powerless avatar gave me many experiences I had forgotten from the distant past. It took me some time to understand why it was valuable to the World-Phoenix.”

“It wasn’t just for your wellbeing?” Belinda asked, sitting on the other side of Dawn. There was still a level of reverential trepidation to the diamond-ranker, from Clive and Humphrey especially. Belinda, however, shared Jason’s preference for judging people by criteria other than rank.

“The World-Phoenix doesn’t think in those terms,” Dawn explained. “The fact that great astral beings primarily interact with the cosmos through vessels leads people to anthropomorphise them to a degree that isn’t strictly accurate. It’s not just that they don’t think like mortals but that the level they operate on isn’t the same as ours. In some regards, they might not even be considered sentient, any more than gravity or heat is sentient.”

“The Builder is an exception, though, isn’t he?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Dawn said. “There are many mysteries surrounding the ascension of the Builder and the sanctioning of his predecessor. Secrets that even I and others like me are not privy to. Those secrets, whatever they may be, are widely

considered to be the impetus for the Builder's famously erratic and idiosyncratic behaviour."

"It's not just about the vessels he uses?" Clive asked, joining in on the conversation.

"That is a part of it," Dawn said. "A larger part than most realise. I was explaining the World-Phoenix's purpose in assigning me to watch over Jason. Their vessels, like I used to be, play a much greater role than simply translating the will and intention of the great astral beings. With the possible exception of the Builder, great astral beings are incapable of thinking on a scale as small as the one we operate on. They see things on a cosmic scale; they think of people in numbers so large, we don't have words for them. They cannot look at you or me as individuals any more than you can look at the molecules that make up your body."

"The what?" Clive asked.

"The tiny things that everything is made of," Jason said. "Don't tell Knowledge I told you that. Ask Travis about it."

"What's that?" Travis asked from the other end of the table.

"I was telling Clive how molecules are the tiny things that everything is made of."

"That's not really how that works," Travis said. "I don't think Knowledge would like you spreading that kind of thing around."

"Well, you ask her how much you can tell Clive and leave me out of it," Jason said. "Dawn, what were you saying about vessels?"

"Vessels aren't just mouthpieces for the great astral beings. They are the means by which those beings operate on any scale an individual mortal can perceive."

"Are you saying they need vessels to think for them?" Jason asked.

"It's vastly more complicated than that," Dawn said, "but yes, to a large degree. I was the First Sister of the Cult of the

World-Phoenix, which essentially made me its leader across a region of the cosmos larger than I can ever expect to see. But I was only one of numbers beyond counting, and between us all, we formed something like a hive mind. A thought engine made up of the most powerful mortals in existence. When you think of the consciousness of a great astral being, this is what you're actually dealing with. It is possible to commune directly with a great astral being, but only for those who have spent years in preparing to become a prime vessel. Doing so is unlike anything I can begin to describe, however. It is to touch the infinite; it cannot be encapsulated."

"I know a guy who'll sell you mushrooms that do something similar," Belinda said.

"Lindy!" Clive scolded. Jason chuckled and Dawn shook her head with a bemused expression.

"My larger point is," Dawn explained, "that the World-Phoenix doesn't care about me or my wellbeing because it can't. What it can recognise is when a tool—in this case, me—is not functioning the way it should. There is a limit to mortal power and I have reached it. As you might imagine, that kind of power affects you in various ways. You will come to understand this more as you realise how gold and diamond ranks are not like the ones that came before, but that still lies ahead."

"How so?" Humphrey asked, joining in. "My mother said something very similar to me after she got to gold rank."

"What else did she tell you?" Dawn asked.

"That I'd learn more when I got stronger."

"There you are, then," Dawn told him. "But as Jason said, that kind of power can be lonely. Even enemies are somewhat friends because there are so few who know what you know and have seen what you've seen. It's isolating, taking you away from mortality, both literally and figuratively. I am not much easier to kill than a god."

"It's possible to kill gods?" Humphrey asked.

“No,” Dawn said. “It isn’t. The point is, it becomes easy to let what you are consume who you are until nothing is left. I may no longer be the direct vessel of the World-Phoenix, but I am still connected to it and always will be. My purpose and role in its service is forever and I am proud of that. But that role is of a mortal representative. I now realise how removed I had become from mortal sensibilities, drifting too far from what the World-Phoenix needs me to be. As a tool, I had become a hammer with no head.”

“So your boss sent you to me, knowing I’d drag you into the muck,” Jason said.

“It’s not quite that simple, but more or less,” Dawn told him. “And I thank you for doing so.”

“Yeah, no worries,” Jason said. “Can you pass me that fire-plum sauce?”

Liara had taken the unusual step of allowing a Shade body to occupy her shadow. She wanted to know the moment that he learned any new information. Unfortunately, Shade’s bodies that had hitched a ride with the Purity worshippers had been sealed from communication by whatever protections the enemy facilities boasted. Contact was cut off from the moment they entered the underwater vessels the enemies used. Shade could tell no more than that his bodies were still intact and not under any duress.

“Anything?” she asked as she sat in an office in the Adventure Society building. She was not using her own secure office because the shielding around the Builder response unit’s facilities would cut Shade off as effectively as the Purity stronghold.

“Nothing new,” Shade said.

“Sorry,” she told him. “I know you would tell me, yet I’m asking every few minutes.”

“Sorry for what?” Shade asked.

“For being annoying.”

“You do realise whose familiar I am, don’t you? I am older than some of this world’s gods and my knowledge base now includes a comprehensive understanding of the canonicity of various entries to the Knight Rider franchise.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I am not largely an advocate for ignorance,” Shade said, “but in this instance, I offer with all goodwill my hope that you retain yours in perpetuity.”

There was a knock at the door and Liara called her assistant in. It was an Adventure Society functionary assigned to her for administrative purposes, rather than one of her subordinate adventurers.

“Lord Cassin Amouz has arrived,” the functionary informed her.

“Thank you. Show him in.”

BLAME

THE ADVENTURE SOCIETY FUNCTIONARY LEFT LIARA'S temporary office after informing her about the arrival of Lord Cassin Amouz. Once she was alone, Liara allowed shame to flash over her expression before schooling it. She had been determined to avoid casualties in the expedition to the Builder island, but the unexpected raid by Purity worshippers had led to her failure. Three adventurers had been captured in battle and only two were recovered before they could be taken from the island. The son and heir of Lord Amouz had been the only adventurer the enemy had managed to escape with.

Gibson Amouz—her husband's cousin Gibbie—had been spirited away from the island, as had a pair of clockwork kings. The hostage had been extracted by water, while the kings had been portalled away, along with a small handful of Purity worshippers. Finding them all had become Liara's obsession now the expedition was done.

One of the best leads she had was Jason Asano's familiar, who had tracked the enemy from the island. Unfortunately, the enemy's security precautions had thus far prevented the familiar from reporting back with any details, its current circumstances unknown.

Liara had been going over records of any portal user strong enough to move the two gold-rank clockwork kings. Normally, that would be futile, but during a monster surge—especially this monster surge—even gold-rank portal users were carefully tracked. It was known by the Adventure Society that prior to the Purity church's fall, the Order of Redeeming Light had no

gold-rankers in the Sea of Storms, which was why it had largely gone overlooked. While some entirely unknown gold-ranker may have been brought in, it was quite unlikely.

It was difficult to go entirely unnoticed by the time an essence user reached gold rank, even when they were entirely unaffiliated with the Adventure Society, Magic Society or any other major force. One way or another, it was almost impossible to secretly reach gold rank given the requirements to do so. It took years of activity to reach that level through monster hunting, and the monsters required for the latter stages especially couldn't just be anonymously wiped out without being noticed. As for advancement through monster cores, that many high-rank cores couldn't just vanish off the market unnoticed.

That was not to say a secret gold-ranker was impossible. With the right support and sufficient patience, it would be possible to raise one up and some groups were known to have done so in the past. Liara was well aware that the secretive Order of Redeeming Light was a likely candidate for such a project, but that was the very reason that such organisations were watched with extra care by the Adventure Society.

The high-end monster core market and high-rank monster-slaying were both carefully recorded by the Adventure Society. This was done specifically to keep track of potential gold-rank threats by the same department that hunted down people with restricted essences and powers. Liara had been a member of that department for years until being moved to the Builder response unit, hunting down vampires, necromancers and other major threats. Her previous posting meant she had the access and the experience required to go through the records looking for just that kind of activity. She knew how to locate already known gold-rankers operating outside of the aegis of the Adventure Society.

As for gold-rankers that were members of the Adventure Society, the portal users were rigorously tracked during monster surges, not because they were threats but to maximise their utility. Between the society member records and the tracking information for rogue essence users, the monster

surge gave Liara a unique opportunity to potentially track the portal user that extracted the clockwork kings and the Purity worshippers.

The largest impediment to Liara's search was that it had to be a process of elimination from a vast collection of records. Portal schedules, market tracking, field reports about encounters with rogue essence users. The nature of portal users was that they could operate over vast distances, expanding the number of records she had to go through. A high-rank mind could rapidly process information with excellent retention, making every gold-ranker a speed-reader with near-eidetic memory. Even so, the sheer amount of information she had to go over was daunting, and she needed to do it alone. The records she went over were all about gold-rankers, which needed to be heavily restricted or high-ranked adventurers wouldn't subject themselves to them.

For this reason, Liara's desk was piled high with record books. If not for magical books allowing records to be duplicated between branches, what she was attempting wouldn't be possible at all. She would have liked to take up Jason's offer to have Shade use his many bodies to help her go over them, but she couldn't cut corners. The Adventure Society had to maintain its integrity in the eyes of gold-rankers and adventurers in general or they wouldn't be able to operate as an organisation. An isolated, rural branch being corrupt was one thing, but Rimaros was the heart of civilisation and power.

Sensing her husband's uncle approaching the door of her office, Liara stood up. He entered without knocking as their auras met; the etiquette of high-rankers was based heavily around aura interactions. It was one of the reasons that aura control was increasingly important at high-rank. Improper training increasingly stood out at the upper echelons of society. For this reason, even aristocrats who ranked up with cores and had never fought a monster in their lives often had aura control that rivalled an adventurer.

"Lord Amouz," Liara greeted, her voice sober.

"Really, Liara?" he asked with a smile. "Lord Amouz?"

“I lost your son.”

“You and I are adventurers, as is my son. We all understand that it comes with risk. My nephew might have married into your house and not you into ours, but it doesn’t change that you and I are family.”

Cassin Amouz had swarthy skin with the clean, smooth perfection of gold rank. His hair and eyes were a rich shade of brown, with the metallic sheen ubiquitous amongst celestines. Less ubiquitous was his goatee, which was highly unusual. Very few celestines could grow facial hair and it was usually a sign of one parent being from another race, the birth made possible with the help of the Church of Fertility.

“Lord Amouz, I want to apologise again for the capture of your son while he was under my command.”

“You can still call me Uncle Cassin.”

“I could tell Uncle Cassin to go home,” Liara said. “Lord Amouz, on the other hand, can use his influence to forcibly obtain a briefing to which he isn’t entitled.”

The friendly smile on Cassin’s face froze.

“You said it yourself, Liara: it’s my son. A son that you lost.”

Liara’s eyes narrowed and she tilted her head, lost for a moment in thought.

“Thank you, Lord Amouz. I’ve been blaming myself for your son’s loss, which is unproductive and unhelpful to my judgement. Having someone else blame me was what I needed to look at the situation more objectively. I appreciate that.”

Cassin frowned.

“Let’s just move forward with the briefing,” he said. “I understand there is some manner of spy attached to the enemy?”

“I wouldn’t normally disclose operational matters,” she said, “but as I have been directed to give you a basic briefing, I will do so. Please understand that I will be avoiding too many specifics.”

“Of course. I can’t expect special treatment just because we’re family.”

“You’re getting special treatment because you’re Lord Amouz, not because you’re family. I wouldn’t let you anywhere near this if I had my way. You shouldn’t have access to any of the sensitive information still in play.”

“Yet I do. I find it best to act in accordance with the way things are, Liara, not the way they should be. It’s the practical but sometimes unfortunately necessary approach.”

Liara frowned but nodded her acknowledgement.

“As it stands,” she said, “our informational asset is unable to communicate with us because the enemy stronghold has preventative measures in place. While we are awaiting word, other approaches are being taken to locate and liberate your son.”

“Such as?”

“Specialist teams are examining the Purity worshippers that fell on the island as well as any traces they left behind. The prisoners are being questioned, although they are zealots and we cannot expect much.”

“Leave me alone with one of them and they’ll talk.”

“With all due respect, Lord Amouz, no they won’t. Your frustration at your impotence in retrieving your son makes you angry and anger feels powerful. The truth is just the opposite. Without the right essence abilities, all anger does is make you weak and your judgement compromised. It leads you to throw around your influence in ways that you shouldn’t, accomplishing nothing but slowing down the people working to get your son back to you.”

“I don’t like your tone, Princess.”

“I don’t care.”

Cassin glared at Liara.

“I’ve come to you today to warn you that retrieving my son should be a priority not just because of his social standing.

You know Gibson, of course. He was never going to be the greatest adventurer.”

“He’s quite capable.”

“With the training he’s received, it would be near impossible to lack at least basic capability. His problem has always been timidity. Not cowardice, but a significant deficit of boldness. He’s an excellent administrator and I always held that he will make a fine head to our household once I step down, if only he can learn to be more daring. Administering the family’s holdings is all well and good, but it’s not enough when he needs to lead. When he begged off the post your husband now holds, I knew I had to step in. I was rather hoping that this monster surge would finally be the making of him.”

“I know what you are going to say, Lord Amouz. Since you were kind enough to rectify my own lapse in judgement, I have realised that while I’ve been blaming myself for the capture of your son, I was wrong to do so.”

“I am an adventurer, Liara, just like you. We both understand that some events are out of our control, no matter how well we prepare. It is the reality of what we do.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I suspect the blame lies with you, Lord Amouz.”

“Me? I may have gotten my son’s team assigned to your expedition, but if they were anything less than fully qualified, the Adventure Society would never have allowed it.”

Liara’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“You had his team assigned to my expedition? I didn’t know that, but it’s irrelevant. You’ve been setting Gibson up for far longer than the expedition.”

“Explain yourself,” Cassin growled.

“I had been wondering about certain aspects of how the Purity worshippers behaved on the island. Why some of them grouped up to attack a gathered force of four adventurer teams. Why they captured people and why your son was so quickly

and carefully extracted while the others were transported more carelessly. I should have seen it earlier.”

“What do you mean?” Cassin asked.

“It’s no secret that you share more with Gibson than you should—Uncle Cassin. He holds too many of your family’s business secrets. Things he shouldn’t have been told until he was gold rank and ready to assume your seat in House Amouz. I believe that it’s very likely your son was specifically targeted.”

“Why would the Purity church care about what my son knows? Those are family secrets. Purity isn’t going into the mining business.”

“The material reserves provided by your family are strategically critical to Rimaros,” Liara said, standing up. “We’re done here, Lord Amouz. I need to go report my suspicions and you need to prepare to brief the Adventure Society on the potential damage that could be done with the information your son has. You can expect to hear from us soon.”

“Hold on,” Cassin said, also getting to his feet. “I came here to be briefed on how you’re going to get my son back.”

“And I didn’t push back on that the way I should have, because I felt guilty. I’m pushing now. Get out of my office, Lord Amouz.”

“I will remind you, Princess, that your husband is currently at one of my family’s more difficult-to-access underwater facilities.”

Liara went dead still for a long moment and her aura vanished from the room. Cassin felt a chill run through him before Liara’s aura returned as a gentle, polite glow in his senses.

“Lord Amouz,” she said, her voice quiet and soft. “I understand that your son’s predicament has left you in a state of distress, so I shall put aside the fact that you just threatened the husband of someone who is both a high-ranking Adventure Society official and a member of the royal family. Be aware,

however, that as of this moment, my forbearance has reached its limit. If you use your influence to come sniffing around my operation again, I will smack you down. If, on the other hand, you threaten my husband again—your sister’s son—then your own son will have a position to return to once I rescue him because his father will have gone mysteriously missing and will never be found again.”

Cassin snorted derision.

“You generously forgave my threat, only to make one of your own?”

“Yes,” Liara said, her voice still gentle. “I threatened you, Lord Amouz, whereas you threatened my family. Your own family. I understand that you are angry and distraught, but you are an adventurer turned mining administrator. You know what I am and what I’ve done, so I will give you a moment to think very carefully before deciding if you’re going to leave this room or die in it.”

Cassin’s eyes didn’t leave Liara’s face. His expression was twisted, his lip curling as if angry words were trying to escape his mouth. Slowly, he controlled his expression until his face was blank aside from his burning eyes. He turned and walked away without saying another word.

SPEED

JASON AND HIS TEAM WERE HAVING A RELATIVELY RELAXED time in the days after the Builder island expedition. The monster surge raged on and the Purity worshippers remained a lurking threat, but after a day off, the team was assigned to low-priority missions. With Jason awaiting word from his familiars stuck behind enemy lines, Liara didn't want him roaming all through the Sea of Storms, at least not for any length of time. As such, Jason, Humphrey and Clive were all placed on portal duty.

They spent the day with Jason portalling Clive and Humphrey around the Sea of Storms to various locations he had already visited, just long enough that they could use the destinations themselves. This meant primarily fortress towns and other regional centres strong enough to withstand a monster surge. As none of them could transport whole adventurer teams, or anyone higher than silver rank, they would be assigned to serving as portal-hopping delivery men for critical supplies.

The rest of the team were also assigned relevant tasks. There was always room for more healers, so Neil had been sent to work with his church. While the priority for healing was the adventurers, the needs of Rimaros did not pause for the monster surge. As for Belinda, she found herself quickly snatched up for an expedition. One of the priority projects for the Adventure Society was exploring former strongholds of the Builder cult as they were discovered and she was roped into one of those.

Following the destruction of the Builder's cities, the great astral being's forces abandoned the Storm Kingdom and more than a few of their secret strongholds remained. As launching points for their efforts to seize the local astral spaces, the long-hidden redoubts had been exposed and were now left empty. The Adventure Society was eager to explore these lairs and eliminate any threats left as parting gifts. More importantly, they wanted to find anything that would help those still fighting the Builder elsewhere around the world.

Most freshly discovered strongholds had traps and defences still in place, which made Belinda an excellent asset. Long before she obtained the trap essence, she had years of experience getting people into places the owners did not want people going in. Years of adventuring had further honed those abilities to a fine point.

The only member of the team with no specialty role was Sophie. She considered joining Belinda, but it quickly became clear the expedition leader would sideline her, only wanting Belinda's expertise. Instead, she took on a contract to deliver goods overland using dimensional bags. She would be moving alone to low-priority destinations on the southern mainland coast, in areas designated as low-threat.

It would be a rare chance to truly open up her abilities and push her speed to the limit while on a contract; normally, that was something she could only do in low-pressure circumstances. When moving with her team, she could only speed around in short bursts, usually in combat. Even travelling, the alternate forms of Stash and the travel form of Onslow were unable to match her pace when she truly pushed her limits. Only Shade's jet forms were her match, and even those took time to accelerate and the thin air of altitude to outpace her. Those had already reached their full potential, though, and by the time she was into the upper levels of silver, she expected to blast by him.

For Sophie, her speed was nothing so simple as one essence ability that increased it, although that was certainly something she possessed. It had been her first and, for many years, only essence ability, to the point of reaching bronze

rank before she gained a second one. Now, however, it was very different. More than half of her powers were movement abilities, movement-enhancing abilities or otherwise related to speed. By chaining them together, exploiting the synergies and drawing out the nuances, the resulting speed vastly outpaced any single essence ability. Short of teleporting to the destination, only speed-specialised vehicles were better for the rank and she had her eye on beating them.

Almost no terrain could slow her down. Tangled forests or even thick jungles were barely an impedance. Even running along walls or on the surface of water didn't slow her unless the terrain had been enchanted to actively resist her passage. The only difference between harsh terrain and flat roads was that roads were less fun. Even the sky was becoming part of Sophie's domain as she increasingly became as comfortable in the air as standing on her feet.

Ability: [Leaf on the Wind] (Wind)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
 - Cost: Moderate mana-per-second.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 3 (67%)
-
- Effect (iron): Glide through the air; highly effective at riding the wind. Can reduce weight to slow fall at a reduced mana cost. Ignore or ride the effects of strong wind, even when this ability is not in active use.

- Effect (bronze): Moderate control of nearby airflow while in use. Cost of gliding reduced to low mana-per-second. Strong winds increase your rate of stamina and mana recovery, even when this ability is not in active use.
- Effect (silver): Fly for moderate mana-per-second; highly effective at riding the wind. Gliding no longer costs mana. You can control the airflow around you, including using winds to carry others with you when you fly. Carrying others increases the ongoing mana cost and incurs a speed penalty, both scaling with the number of people carried.

Jason's cloak ability also offered outright flying at silver rank, along with a suite of other useful powers. Sophie's flight ability was far more focused. Even at a default level, ignoring the power to carry others or gain benefits from riding the wind, it offered superior speed and control to what Jason could manage. It also had benefits that fit right in with Sophie's general trend of minor effects that, when used in conjunction with one another and the sufficient application of skill, became very formidable.

The description of the silver-rank effect included a passing mention of being effective at riding the wind. It did not stand out within the description compared to flying around with other people but, to Sophie, it was possibly the most important point. For one thing, the ability itself gave her some ability to manipulate the airflow around her. Rather than use it to push her speed, however, she had taken to shifting air around her as she moved through it instead. Reducing the resistance instead of pushing harder against it proved the more effective means of improving her speed. While it required more finesse when using the ability, the results were exceptional, impacting acceleration, top speed and fine movement control.

Once Sophie added in her Wind Wave power, her mobility entered a whole new realm. Usable every handful of seconds and producing a massive blast of wind, it launched her forward like a squid using a water jet. On top of this were the various passive bonuses that affected one or both abilities.

Ability: [Free Runner] (Swift)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 4 (06%)
-
- Effect (iron): Increased speed. Low stamina and mana per second cost to run on walls and water. Momentum must be maintained on walls or water to prevent falling.
-
- Effect (bronze): Enhanced balance and spatial sense.
-
- Effect (silver): Control over leaps made using a run-up is significantly increased, including the partial control of movement through the air. Can combine with glide and flight powers to travel beyond normal top glide, flight and running speeds by chaining gliding leaps. Any other effects that enhance glide

and flight speed are enhanced for a brief period after leaping.

The Free Runner power was Sophie's original speed boost that, as it turned out, also applied to flight. The silver-rank effect allowed her to use a movement style that combined running, gliding and flying together, the result being a comprehensive transfiguration in the way she moved. It turned her collection of movement powers into different aspects of a holistic mobility style as sophisticated and nuanced as a martial art. Even so, it was far from the full extent of the powers boosting her mobility.

Every celestine had a racial gift that enhanced essence powers of the special ability type, much as humans and elves had affinities to special attacks and spells respectively. Many dismissed the celestine bonus as less powerful because, while it applied to the broadest range of abilities, the elves and humans boasted the powers most obviously useful in combat.

The celestine special ability aptitude was mostly appreciated for enhancing portal powers. This was doubly true because they also possessed astral affinity, which improved portal powers even more. Celestines were known as the top portal users amongst all the essence-using races.

Sophie was not a portal user, but the enhancement to dimensional abilities did not go to waste; she had no shortage of appropriate powers. While her Mirage Step ability could move her short distances through space instantaneously, more often her powers bent the space around her. They enhanced her movement, helped her to navigate obstacles or even dodge without dodging, making attacks that seemed to land miss her entirely.

Sophie's relentless pursuit of speed had pushed her racial gifts to the limit, eventually triggering gift evolutions. As with the rest of her team, she had managed to evolve several of her abilities, but the one that evolved between Jason's death and

return had not come during combat but as she trained with hellish self-discipline.

Ability: [Way of the Wind]

- Transfigured from racial gift [Special Ability Affinity].
- Special abilities have increased effect.
- Abilities related to movement and speed that are affected by the wind have the effects of wind on those abilities significantly increased. Synergistic effects between abilities related to speed and flight are significantly increased.

Even that had not been the end of the powers stacking up to enhance her movement. Her Avatar of Speed power enhanced her movement abilities while reducing their mana and stamina costs. Child of the Celestial Wind was the rarest essence ability in her power set. It only appeared amongst races that had astral affinity as a racial gift which, on Pallimustus, meant celestines. Or, potentially, outworlders. The ability not only boosted all her racial gifts but her wind and dimension powers as well.

The result of all of these overlapping effects was bonus on bonus on bonus—a synergistic rat king of intertwined abilities. Clive had once attempted to map out Sophie's power interactions using Magic Society records of the various

abilities. He spent the whole time complaining about not having Jason's interface and eventually gave up. The one time Clive brought up trying again after Jason's return, Jason had vanished into a shadow and the cloud house snack fridge became mysteriously locked. Taika and Gary explained very clearly that Clive was not to do it again.

After accepting a delivery contract, Sophie took charge of a high-capacity dimensional bag. Designed specifically for those with flight powers, it was svelte and strapped firmly onto the back without impairing mobility. She then set out from Rimaros, flying south over the water at breakneck speed. Unlike the airships that measured their pace to avoid attracting monsters, Sophie moved over the sea so fast that air displacement left a wake in the water behind her.

Every so often, a monster would erupt from the water beneath her and attempt to snatch her out of the air. Some she sensed coming and easily avoided, while others were stealth ambushers. She lacked Jason's powerful senses and had to rely on pure reflexes to avoid them, blinking away from their teeth with her Mirage Step power, leaving only an afterimage to explode in the monster's mouth.

The monsters attacking her were silver rank, with no bronze foolish enough to try after sensing her. In one instance, however, a gold-rank monster appeared. She didn't sense its approach at all until a forest of tentacles sprang out of the water with a speed surpassing that of silver rank. Instinctively, Sophie's Eternal Moment power kicked in and everything around her slowed as her personal time stream accelerated.

She passed through the suddenly glacial tentacles with effortless speed, weaving between them without interrupting her subjective pace at all. Sophie hadn't stopped to fight any of the previous monsters that had popped out of the water, leaving them all in her wake. She was going to do the same with this one.

The gold-rank monster, however, was not so easily left behind. As the Eternal Moment power came to an end, the tentacles slipped back into the water behind her as an even larger number rose all around and ahead of her.

“How big is this thing?”

DELICATE FLOWERS

SOPHIE'S ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE THE CLUTCHES OF THE GOLD-rank monster did not go as planned. Her time-accelerating power, Eternal Moment, did not last as long as the name suggested. She did escape the tentacle forest rising from the water in her frozen moment, but as soon as it ended, even more tentacles emerged from the water to surround her again.

The monster was clearly a vast presence under the surface, despite her not having sensed it at all. Escaping it would be trickier than she had anticipated, especially with Eternal Moment now on cooldown. Instead, she had to push her other abilities to the limit, digging out every skerrick of speed and skill she had.

As the tentacles lunged after her with gold-rank speed, she used every trick at her disposal to remain untouched. She soared through the air, dashed on the wind, ran on the choppy water kicked up by the tentacles and even ran along the thick tentacles themselves.

The purple-red tentacles were quick, flexible and as wide as her entire body; at least, they were at the level of the water. They tapered the closer they came to their barbed tips, becoming increasingly more swift, flexible and supple. There were intermittent barbs along their length that, if hooked into her flesh, would easily let her be dragged into the water. Sophie didn't let that stop her from using the tentacles, feet falling between the barbs as she ran up the length of one and kicked off of it. She had little choice but to weave tightly

through the tentacles, baiting them into entangling one another as she zipped through the fleshy forest.

As Sophie made her way over the water, roiling from the thrashing tentacles, it became clear that the monster beneath the surface was abnormally fast. She estimated that while it was both gold-rank and very fast, she could outpace it if not for the web of tentacles hunting her. Even with her near-miraculous mobility, navigating safely was slowing her down.

She considered flying up and out of their reach but immediately dismissed the idea. Where they emerged from the water, the tentacles were girthy and relatively slow. They were more flexible where they thinned out, further along, but reaching back down to grasp at Sophie gave them an awkwardness that made them less difficult to evade. If she went into the air, their greater flexibility and speed would give them a much greater chance of catching her out.

She stayed low instead, darting through the jungle of limbs that kept expanding as she moved through it, tentacles continuously emerging from the water ahead. The monster tried pushing less of each tentacle out of the water to use the more flexible portions, but because Sophie stayed close to the surface, water-resistance slowed the appendages just enough that she could neatly evade them.

Each second that ticked by was a fresh escape from death, with Sophie's dashing, pinball flight in constant danger of being yanked to a halt. In every moment, she was a hair's breadth from a tentacle hook skewering her flesh, arresting her momentum and dragging her into the water. She used blasts of air with maximal efficiency, not just launching herself but simultaneously pushing tentacles out of her path.

While Sophie's Wind Wave power could send even hefty monsters tumbling through the air, it barely made the massive tentacles waver. That, however, was enough. Like Jason, Sophie understood that battles were won and lost in critical moments. Every moment she stole and exploited was a step closer to victory as she clawed her way to escape, instant by instant.

Sophie needed to be victorious in every moment or she would be dragged into the water and certain doom. Every tool at her disposal was employed, blinking with Mirage Step, dashing with Wind Wave and kicking off from the tentacles to shift her flight trajectory. When putting a foot to the tentacles wasn't viable, she used the air itself as solid ground.

Ability: [Cloud Step] (Balance)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
 - Cost: Low stamina and mana.
 - Cooldown: 15 seconds.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (94%).
-
- Effect (iron): Take a single step on air as if it were solid ground, becoming intangible for a brief moment. This ability can be used while all steps are on cooldown at an extreme mana cost per step. If used within mist, fog or cloud, this ability has no cooldown.
-
- Effect (bronze): Can be used a second time. Cooldown reduced to 15 seconds, with each cooldown restoring one use. The next attack suffered within a brief period after the intangibility ends is significantly reduced. When not using this ability within mist, fog or clouds, a short-lived mist can be

produced at a low mana cost. The mist is too thin to obscure vision.

- Effect (silver): Can be used a third time. Cost of use while on cooldown reduced to very high. When using this ability within mist, fog or cloud, the intangibility effect can be extended. The mist produced by this ability covers a wider area and lasts longer.

A tentacle swiped through Sophie as she became intangible for a brief but critical moment. The inherent magic of the monster inflicted a little harm on her life force, but only a fraction of what the limb slapping into her body would have done. Mostly there was a tingling sensation as the tentacle passed through her. Another tentacle swipe seemed to hit her solid form, yet missed because of dimensional displacement. Each passing moment brought with it a narrow escape from death, but her attempts to escape the monster increasingly felt futile.

No matter how fast she moved, the monster managed to keep up, raising more and more tentacles as if the sea itself were trying to snatch her down. The tentacles were too numerous, too flexible and too quick to maintain her maximum pace while avoiding capture. Even her incredible reflexes and silky-smooth evasions were insufficient to fully accelerate, yet she still navigated the tentacles more quickly than most adventurers of her rank could move in a straight line.

She was confident of outpacing the monster given the chance to make a straight-line dash. Even a zigzagging dash would be enough, so long as the terrain wasn't actively attempting to drag her into the ocean. The monster may have been gold rank, but its main body had to be massive to support all the tentacles. The drag of the water on that bulk meant that the speed it was going was already implausible. She was certain it was at or near its limit. She didn't have the time to

check, but she imagined a creature that size, moving at that speed, had to be causing small tidal waves.

Sophie's formidable endurance came into play as minutes ticked past, every second spent in wild desperation. Even though she constantly employed her powers, she was in no danger of running low on mana. Multiple abilities reduced the mana consumption of her already inexpensive powers, while others boosted her mana recovery. As a result, even her most costly power, Eternal Moment, did not tax her reserves too greatly.

That power to make time seemingly freeze around her was a trump card for when things went wrong. Her intention had been to hold off using it as long as she could, but critical moments came again and again, forcing it into one cooldown after another. She managed to keep a balance and not overtax her mana, but overtaxing her concentration was the greater threat.

With every moment requiring utmost focus, Sophie knew that it was only a matter of time until she slipped up, and that would be the moment that she died. Something needed to change; without some chance coming along, sooner or later, the monster would drag her beneath the waves.

The break came when she saw an island in the distance. It was small and unremarkable but exactly what she needed. She had to be careful not to let her desire to reach it make her sloppy and rush, causing her to fall on escape's doorstep. The monster seemed to understand her intentions, perhaps already dealing with shallower water as they approached land. Geysers of scalding water erupted from the sea, which at first made Sophie wonder why the monster had held the ability back.

She realised that it was a panic reaction as they were not especially hard to dodge. If anything, the geysers offered more cover for her evasive manoeuvres. Using Cloud Step for a moment of intangibility let her pass through the geysers unharmed, neatly avoiding tentacles and opening a path forward. What's more, the steam they gave off let her use Cloud Step without incurring the cooldown. Cloud Step ability created its own mist to trigger the cooldown-reducing effect,

but Sophie's speed always left that mist behind before she needed the ability again.

Sophie didn't stop when she reached the shore of the island; the tentacles continued to pursue her from the water. They stopped appearing ahead of her, to her relief, having half-feared they would start bursting out of the ground. Or even worse, that the island itself would turn out to be the monster's main body. She had heard of such a creature in the Storm Kingdom's northeast, but that had turned out to be a native magical beast, and a diamond-rank one at that. It had awoken in an uninhabited region of tiny islands during the surge and was better at clearing out monsters in its territory than the Adventure Society. As the handful of population centres had already evacuated to the fortress town, the society decided to leave the creature be.

Tentacles chased her from the water and there was a dangerous moment as she passed through their fastest and most flexible range. She took one solid hit but timed a Cloud Step to trigger the damage-reduction effect. She was bounced off a beach of loose rocks and popped right back up, flying further inland.

It was a rocky island, strewn with jungle. She skimmed over the treetops, wary of more monsters popping up through the canopy. She felt a surge of relief as she finally moved beyond the tentacles' reach but did not allow herself to relax. A small, empty island was no safe harbour, but she could use it as a roadblock for the humungous monster. Now that she was clear of tentacles, it was time to pour on the speed while the monster was forced to go around. She wouldn't stop until she reached the southern mainland.

Sophie shot out over the water on the far side of the island, rocketing along with all the pace she could muster. There was no sign of the monster, but there hadn't been any before its first attack either. She practised absolute wariness along with absolute speed.

As time passed, she was increasingly confident that she'd left the monster behind but didn't let up on speed or alertness. The ambush of a silver-rank monster bursting from the water

was actually a relief, as it would not have drawn near if the gold-rank leviathan was close by. Even so, she didn't relent on her breakneck pace.

Not until she reached solid, continental landmass did she finally allow the tension to escape her body. Slowing to a stop on an empty beach, she let herself fall back onto the golden sand, looking up at the sky and laughing like a madwoman.

Many adventurers would have regretted her choice to race across the water after it attracted such a terrifying monster. She still had no idea exactly what the monster was but didn't especially care. She felt energised, all the more alive for having escaped the grasping tentacles of death. She kicked herself onto her feet, threw up both arms and let out a triumphant whoop of victory. She stopped, startled, as silver light started shining from within her body.

- Celestine racial ability [Celestial Swiftness] has evolved to [Princess of the Firmament].

Ability: [Princess of the Firmament]

- Transfigured from racial gift [Celestial Swiftness].
- [Speed] attribute is increased.
- Dimension effects related to non-teleport and non-portal movement are enhanced. The speed-enhancing aspects of your abilities have increased effect.

Sophie was surprised at still having access to Jason's interface ability, as far as she was from his location in Rimaros. She vaguely recalled Clive talking about it—something about magical density and soul strength. She generally tuned him out when he got that specific tone in his voice. It meant he was trying to turn Jason into an administrative tool again.

She looked over her changed ability. Many might look at the impressive name—which she suspected Jason was somehow responsible for—and think it didn't match the simple, passive effects. Sophie knew better. When she saw some powerful ability, it generally meant that it did what it said in the description and that was the end of it. The ones that appeared unimpressive were the ones that had all the depth. Those were the powers that let her build an unassailable fortress out of synergy, one brick at a time.

She grinned, closing the window as another one popped up.

- Party leader [Jason Asano] has initiated voice chat. Accept [Y/N]?

“You checking up on me, Asano?”

“Racial gift transfiguration isn't triggered by a leisurely ocean trip, Wexler. Do you need us to come save you already? I was just about to portal off and deliver some... what are those things? Are they alive? Why are they wiggling like that?”

“I'm fine,” Sophie said with a laugh. “Let the Adventure Society know that there's a very, very large tentacle monster roaming the waters south of Rimaros. Gold rank.”

“Are you sure you're alright? You don't have to act all tough with us; embrace your vulnerability.”

“We’re not all delicate flowers like you, Asano. You think some creepy ocean doodle forest is enough to catch me? I blew past that thing so fast I doubt it even realised I was there.”

“Doodle forest?”

“I’m getting back to work.”

She ended the voice chat and pulled out a magic map that could track her position. It wasn’t as good as Jason’s map power, but it got the job done. She found her location, figured out the direction to her first stop and set out.

HOPE

LIARA SENSED CASSIN AMOUZ LEAVE THE ADVENTURE Society administration building, her face filled with anger not at him but at herself.

“Dammit.”

Her hand came down forcefully on her desk and it broke in half, scattering books and papers onto the floor.

“Damn it.”

“Lady Liara,” Shade said, emerging from her shadow.

Liara grimaced.

“I’m sorry you had to witness that. The man’s son and heir is missing; of course he’s angry and willing to do everything in his power to get him back. He didn’t need or deserve the way I came down on him and I’ve probably made things a lot worse.”

“That sounds extremely familiar,” Shade said. “If you do not find it presumptuous, Lady Liara, might I perhaps offer some advice? I will take no offence if you decline. I understand that unsolicited advice is often less than welcome in trying times.”

Liara slumped wearily in her chair, looking at the shadow entity.

“You probably have a lot of life experience, don’t you?” she said. “How old are you?”

“I don’t know. Until civilisations started measuring time, it never occurred to me to keep track.”

Liara blinked, mildly startled at the implications of Shade’s response.

“I’d be open to benefiting from your experience,” she said.

“I appreciate that, Lady Liara, but I believe it is not my experience you will most benefit from. I recommend you take a trip to Mr Asano’s cloud house and take the time to speak with him.”

“Why?”

“Mr Asano has experience fighting with organisations that hide like hydras in the dark, growing new heads for each one you cut off.”

“No offence, Shade, but I’m not sure that a gold-ranker turning to a silver as the voice of experience is the approach for me.”

“Are you so sure, milady? Mr Asano has been in a knife fight with the Builder. He has sacrificed his life to save cities on two worlds and fought whole organisations while his allies acted more like enemies. He’s travelled between dimensions and saved his own world more than once. He’s channelled forces that would annihilate diamond-rankers and remade sections of reality in his own image. He has encroached on the domain of gods. You have spent more time fighting monsters than him, yes, but he has fought them by the tens of thousands. Whole cities overrun as he desperately scrambled to save their inhabitants, knowing that he would fail countless people who would die drenched in fear and pain.”

“Are you sure he wants you telling me all of this?”

“He knows what it is to face the enemies in front of you and to carry the burden of lives he failed to save, in spite of his determination. He knows the helplessness of a nebulous enemy that acts with seeming impunity. He understands the price that taking those fights levies on the soul. He will help you, Lady Liara, and be glad to do so.”

Liara stared at Shade in silence for a long time while Shade waited with the patience of eons. It had allowed him to endure centuries of waiting for the Reaper trials to start and the first thirty-seven minutes of *Zardoz*. Sometimes life was too short, even for an immortal entity.

“He’s faced a lot for his rank, hasn’t he?” Liara asked finally.

“He has faced a lot for any rank, Lady Liara. When he was in a position like yours, facing hidden enemies with no clear path forward, he also turned to threats and anger when compassion would have been the more useful path. He has many regrets. I believe you can benefit from his experience and he can benefit from someone who can empathise, even a little. I would also recommend to you Arabelle Remore. She is helping him come to terms with what he’s done and has left to do. I believe they can offer you some clarity that I think you realise you need.”

Liara rubbed her hands over her weary face as Shade retreated to her shadow.

“Rodney!” she called out. The Adventure Society functionary assigned as her temporary assistant came in through the door.

“Ah,” Rodney said, looking at the disaster of the room scattered with papers and the broken desk. He held out his hands and the books and papers flew up into the air as if caught up in a wind that didn’t exist. The broken halves of the table came together, splinters moving back as the table returned to its pre-broken state, with no signs of having been damaged. The books and papers descended to stack onto the table in random piles.

“I’m afraid you’ll need to reorganise them yourself, Lady Liara.”

“That was quite impressive, Rodney.”

“Most of the administrative assistant pool has wood and paper essences, milady. This happens quite a lot.”

After her breakneck speed over the water between Rimaros and the mainland, and the excitement it brought her, Sophie took a more sedate pace. The road network cutting through the jungle was made up of the typical, well-maintained thoroughfares that linked the Storm Kingdom's population centres. She chose her moderated pace based on advice from her companion, to whom she chatted as she sat atop a hill looking out over the water.

"I'm a little surprised you didn't tell on me when that tentacle monster was trying to snatch me," Sophie said.

She was resting in the long grass beside the road at a point where it crested a hill with excellent ocean views. She could see out over the water, spotting a magical storm far off toward the horizon. She had stopped to eat the packed lunch Jason had made her.

"Mr Asano's views on privacy are quite clear," Shade said from Sophie's shadow. "I am only to relay information without your permission when you are either incapacitated or confronted with a threat that assistance could potentially help combat. As only Mr Asano could reach you by shadow-jumping directly to me, there was no point. He would not have been able to defeat the creature or even escape, as you did. He would have been leaping to his death."

"But you didn't even tell him."

"You have not spent as much time with Mr Asano as I, Miss Wexler, so let me assure you that leaping to his death is very much kind of his thing."

"Yeah." She laughed. "That was fairly clear from the outset."

Sophie's feelings about Jason were still something of a mess. He had pulled her out of a life that had been careening from bad to worse where the solution to each disaster had planted the seed of the next. With every desperate choice, she

and Belinda had been digging a hole that would only ever go deeper without offering a path of escape.

Jason had no reason to help them beyond Jory and his affection for Belinda. On the contrary, there had been every incentive to hand Sophie over to the Adventure Society and reap the rewards from the long-standing contract to capture her. Instead, in a move that baffled her at the time but would prove to be iconically typical, Jason initiated a wild plan to simultaneously challenge the directors of the Adventure and Magic Societies. Also typical was that against all odds, it worked, garnering him new and dangerous enemies in the process.

When she asked him why, he gave her a different answer every time. She later realised that he was telling her who he was over and over in different ways, knowing she wouldn't believe any of what he said. In the end, it came down to the fact that he would rather have died fighting to save a stranger than live with condemning one. That Jason had been a hero. A naïve, idiotic, one, doomed to have one of his many attempts at self-sacrifice succeed, which it ultimately did.

In his absence, Jason became a strange figure in Sophie's head and one that even he could never live up to. It took a long time before he stopped occupying that dominant space in her thoughts and she had been able to start moving on.

Then, he came back.

He was different, which was inevitable. At a glance, he seemed the same, but it was only skin deep. Something grim had stained the light-hearted hero she knew, somewhere so deep, it wasn't ever coming out. She knew it had started when he was taken in Greenstone; the price he paid for helping two thieves who didn't deserve it. But Sophie had seen him getting better. His time away from them had made him much worse.

She had already chosen Humphrey by the time he came back. It wasn't an empty decision, made only once she knew he was returning, and it proved to be the right one. What she'd been attracted to in Jason was a goodness that she hadn't experienced in her life, up to that point. It was something she

had come to admire. To aspire to. She eventually realised that Humphrey had those traits as well; he just lacked Jason's way of looking at a wall and seeing a potential door, if only he had the determination.

Humphrey had also changed in the wake of Jason's death. He stopped accepting things as they were and started looking deeper. He began to challenge not just what he felt was wrong but the platforms on which they stood. He wanted to be more like what he'd admired in Jason and, in the process, became what Sophie had been looking for in Jason. Both of them were shocked by what they saw in Jason on his return. The man they had known was a mask this new one wore, and it didn't fit all that well.

Humphrey and Sophie had discussed the changes in Jason more than once. There was a coldness to him now. A willingness to be cruel. What worried Sophie the most was that the strange, wild compassion that had transformed her life seemed to be absent. Its loss had hurt the sense of hope that Jason himself had instilled in her.

Sophie had not treated Jason well after they met. She hadn't trusted him or even the simple concept that anyone would do a good thing for no more reason than it was kind. She lashed out and he had taken it. From what Farrah told her, he had done the same thing again, but for a whole world. And like her, the world had lashed out.

Unlike Sophie, Jason's world didn't attack him with the defensive fearfulness of a wounded animal, the way she had. They had done so out of ambition, greed and the desire to keep the power they had, seize more, or both. The years he had spent there had taken their toll; they left the man who came back to them irrevocably changed.

Jason's friends had quickly realised that he was, in many ways, broken. They had consulted with Farrah and Arabelle, who told them that what Jason needed more than anything was trust. He would never go back to the way he was, but who ever did? What they could do was help him to realise that there was something other than enemies. It was easy to say, but he was in a place where it was not so easy to believe. What Jason

needed to regain was hope—a sense that things could actually get better.

Strangely, Sophie had gone from dismay at the changes in Jason to being buoyed by the chance to offer him the kind of help he had once given her. She had been angry and distrustful and he helped her. He had shown her that he could be trusted and there really were such things as kindness, decency, loyalty and hope. Now she had the chance to remind him in turn. She wasn't going to push, any more than he had pushed her. She would take a page from his own book and do nothing more than prove her point by living it.

“He is getting better, right?” she asked. “I'm not just imagining it?”

“It is not just your imagination, Miss Wexler. He's improving more quickly than I had even hoped, but he still has roads left to travel.”

“Don't we all?”

She finished her sandwich, returned the wrapping paper to the lunch tin Jason had given her and placed the tin in the dimensional pouch at her waist. She then got up and brushed off her pants.

“Miss Wexler, I assume you have sensed the group of essence users approaching.”

“I have.”

“Would you like me to scout them out and make an assessment of their capabilities and intentions?”

“Please. I just hope they're hostiles. After that tentacle monster, I'd love to run into something there's an actual point to punching. Especially if it has a face.”

PREFERRED OPTION

WATCHING THE SKIMMER FROM A HIDDEN POSITION IN THE jungle canopy, Sophie observed the eight men riding in it. Stealth was not her forte, but scouting was a key role for her, so she was at least adequate at hiding her aura. With the inexperienced auras of the men she watched, it was more than enough.

She knew hired thugs when she saw them. Their gear, like the thugs themselves, was silver rank but taken from the bottom of the barrel. The only decent piece of equipment they had was their land skimmer; their armour and weapons were third-rate goods that even a freshly minted silver-rank adventurer would turn their nose up at. Equipment of that quality would be unlikely to show up in the general markets of Livos, let alone the trade halls. Sophie guessed that it was sourced from one of the smaller cities and that the thugs themselves were as well.

Sophie had let Shade assess the men in the approaching skimmer before she moved into their path and his analysis had been no less disdainful than hers. Their gear was only one of many indicators of their mediocrity, the most obvious being their auras.

Monster core use saturated all their auras, but that alone did not preclude them from being adventurers, even capable ones. Many craftspeople used cores while also maintaining Adventure Society membership. They were often part-timers that took contracts to fund their crafting pursuits, and craftspeople adventurers were as active as anyone else during

a surge. Craft-oriented adventurers were typified by their excellent gear, however, and while they might not be guild-level elites, their aura training was never as sloppy as what these thugs were displaying.

These were no craftsmen out looking to earn capital for their business endeavours. Shade had easily eavesdropped on their conversation to uncover their intentions. These weren't just general hired thugs but a small gang hired specifically to intercept Sophie, having been informed of her intended route. Rather than use Shade's scouting to avoid them, she decided to place herself directly in their path.

"I'm still not sure about going after an adventurer," Ramon said yet again.

"Then you shouldn't have come," Corvis told him.

"You said I had to."

"You did have to. You're the healer."

"I'm not much of a healer."

"Oh, we know," Galen said from the driver seat of the skimmer.

"What I meant was that I don't have a lot of healing abilities," Ramon said, glaring at the back of Galen's head.

"What I meant," Galen shot back, "is that you're terrible at everything. When we meet this adventurer, maybe at least wait for the fight to start before running."

"Kiss my ass, Galen."

"I did, while you were sleeping. Now I have a rash."

The rest of the skimmer's occupants burst out laughing.

"I hate you all," Ramon said. "We'll see how funny it is when this adventurer kicks the guts out of all of you."

“It’s one adventurer,” Corvis said, “and you know they don’t send the good ones on these delivery runs. Why would anyone hire us to take on an elite?”

The eight men in the skimmer were, as Sophie postulated, members of a small gang from the nearby city. One of many satellite groups to the local cartel, they were mostly strongmen who kept the local low-end officials in line. They were small-time men who had found their niche, not reaching silver rank until they were all into their forties.

The thugs operated around the border between the Storm Kingdom that controlled the coast and Giralano, the inland nation that lay to the south. While ostensibly a kingdom, Giralano was famously controlled by cartels known for producing substances that ranged from heavily controlled to outright banned in many of the world’s nations. This was due to many of the rare or outright unique plants that grew in the region and minerals that formed underground. Giralano faced strong public sanctions for the goods they grew and mined, with their neighbours heavily controlling the landlocked nation’s borders.

The illicit leadership of Giralano maintained its position through a series of under-the-table deals made with powerful groups within its neighbouring countries. These groups propped up Giralano’s puppet government while making sure their own governments only paid lip service to suppressing the cartels and their smuggling pipelines.

The Adventure Society didn’t care about borders. Their concern was keeping monsters out of population centres, regardless of who ran them or how corrupt they were. So long as the Adventure Society’s activities were not interfered with, they would refrain from interfering in turn.

The neutrality of the Adventure Society was why Sophie was heading in the direction of Giralano and its border city of Casallini. Her delivery was a relatively small and specialised

one, as the local authorities managed most of the needs inside Giralano's borders. Only with critical resources not easily sourced within Giralano itself would the Adventure Society force the Storm Kingdom to supply their sketchy neighbour.

Sophie was in the region where Giralano came closest to the coast. It was close enough that a sufficiently tall hill gave her a fine view of the Sea of Storms. The proximity to the water made it a key region for smuggling, with many semi-hidden pathways through the jungle-covered hills between the border and the shore.

The land skimmer had emerged onto the roadways from a smuggler's path, having used it to avoid the border checkpoints that dotted the roads. Normally, there would also be patrols, but they had been suspended for the duration of the monster surge.

Galen drew the land skimmer to a stop, around twenty metres from the woman standing in the middle of the roadway. She was a celestine with chocolate skin, silver hair and matching eyes. She wore form-fitting leather armour of brown and green with a motif of silver leaves. It was the kind of well-made, expensive gear that successful adventurers used. The men in the skimmer sat, staring at her as she stared back.

"She's gorgeous," Corvis said.

"She's a silver-rank celestine," Ramon said. "They're all gorgeous. If you made a big list of people who are obviously going to be so good-looking that you feel bad for them having to be near you, high-ranking celestines will be at the top."

"We should move to the Storm Kingdom," Galen said wistfully. "Celestines everywhere."

"I'm not sure how appealing they'd find you," Corvis said. "I don't think they go for men whose social life was curtailed by the Church of Purity closing because his nights out usually require cleansing magic after."

“And before, if I’m being honest,” Galen admitted.

“Really?” Ramon asked. “Galen, are you still doing whatever it was with the stinky fruit and the slider thing?”

“It’s not a sliding thing,” Galen said. “It’s a pump.”

“I don’t care what it is. I just don’t want you cleaning it on the dining table. Or the coffee table. Or in the house at all, really.”

“Hey!” the woman called out. “I might be on a loose schedule, but it’s still a schedule. Can you hurry up and try to kidnap me so I can start punching you, please?”

“Does she know why we’re here?”

“Obviously, she knows why we’re here.”

“That’s bad, right?”

Sophie had the reflexes to dodge the half-dozen magic projectiles coming at her in quick succession, but she kept dashing right towards them. Her hands blurred as she used them to intercept the attacks like she was plucking berries.

Ability: [Radiant Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability (magic).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
-
- Current rank: Silver 2 (39%).

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage, which is highly effective against magical defences and intangible or incorporeal enemies. Unarmed attacks do not trigger retaliation effects. Negate any non-damage effects from actively intercepted attacks.
- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Impervious] when intercepting non-physical attacks. Gain mana when intercepting magical projectiles.
- Effect (silver): After intercepting a magical projectile you may make a disruptive-force projectile attack.
- [Impervious] (boon, magic, stacking): Resistances are increased and damage reduction is gained against non-physical damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

She threw out a hand, using the energy of the projectiles she absorbed to fire projectiles of her own. They were disruptive-force, not ideal for harming flesh or armour but excellent against magical shields and intangible entities. For that reason, she aimed them at the healer, around whom a bubble shield glimmered with a faint blue tint.

Sophie was outnumbered eight to one—just enough to make it fun. If the crappy gear and crappier auras didn't give away that they'd never had adventurer training, their skills certainly did. They were as bad as Greenstone experts, which was Sea of Storms garbage. Any adventurer who never left

Greenstone was like the guy who never left his small town and had the same petrol station job at thirty-eight he'd been doing since high school. Sophie didn't know what that meant, but Jason had assured her it was scathing.

The fight was not a swift one because Sophie didn't inflict a lot of damage, at least in the beginning, and was more susceptible to damage when enemies managed to land a hit. Her Karmic Warrior power promised an inevitable transition, however, as those conditions were slowly but surely flipped. Every offensive action taken against her gave a small but cumulative enhancement to her power and spirit attributes, increasing the damage from her flying fists and feet. This affected not just her strength but her powers that added damage to her attacks.

Even more impactful were the karma effects of the power. Every attack against her gave her the good karma boon and the enemy the bad karma affliction. The more good karma she had, the less damage she suffered from those with bad karma. As for her enemies, their bad karma had them suffering transcendent damage every time they attacked her. The amount was inconsequential at first but climbed with every attack.

The growth of these effects wasn't infinite. There was a maximum threshold, although Sophie's Child of the Celestial Wind power raised the threshold of all boons. Her good karma could climb higher than normal. By the time the fight had gone on for several minutes, most of the enemy's attacks were too weak to harm her at all.

Up until that stage, the fight had been thrilling. The thugs weren't any good, but they were still silver-rankers. Sophie had moved through them like a dust devil, delivering rapid-fire attacks and disrupting spell chants with a fist or a foot to the mouth. High-rank bodies were unlike normal bodies, and she had continued her ongoing experiments on the directions that silver-rank joints would bend.

She didn't have any suppression collars, so she took what was her preferred option anyway and beat most of them to death. She left a couple alive for questioning, which wasn't hard. They weren't going to bleed to death unless someone

like Jason came along, and silver-rank limbs would grow back on their own, given enough time. If anything, it was harder to take them off in the first place with bare hands.

Liara approached Jason's cloud house, still uncertain about following Shade's advice. The building was eerily impenetrable to even her formidable senses, which was a little unnerving. As she stood, staring at the door, the entire wall next to the door opened like the eye of some vast monster as it roused from slumber. Jason was inside, sitting in a chair with a book on astral theory in hand.

He was in a now-exposed parlour. Unlike the outside, which was disguised as a normal, if impressive, wooden building, the interior was very clearly made up of cloud-stuff. A side table manifested of cloud-stuff and he rested the book on it. Shade emerged from Jason's shadow.

"Mr Asano, if you're too lazy to get the door, I am happy to do so in your stead. We are being visited by a princess, not one of Miss Belinda's herbal supplement suppliers. Please allow the household to demonstrate at least a moderate decorum."

"And yet, you're chiding me in front of company?"

"Doing so in private is demonstrably ineffective. I recognise that attempting to shame a famously shameless man may be an exercise in futility, but I endeavour, nonetheless."

Jason shook his head turning his attention back to Liara.

"What brings you by, Princess? If I had any new information, Shade would have told you already."

"Shade didn't tell you why I was coming?"

"He didn't tell me you were coming at all. I have rules about privacy when Shade is inhabiting friendly shadows. I'm a strong believer in ethical lines, if only to stop myself from slipping further across them than I should."

“May I come in?”

“If you wish, although I’ll give you a warning first. If you come in here, you’ll be entering my domain. You won’t have the same power disparity over me you normally would. In fact, I could make things quite dangerous for you, should I be so inclined.”

“I’m familiar with cloud flasks,” Liara said.

“Mine has seen some modifications that go outside what is normally possible,” he warned her. “Be aware that if you step in here, you will, to a degree, come under my power. I know that’s not something you’re used to anymore, being a gold-ranker.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Then, by all means, be welcome in my home.”

He made a welcoming gesture and she stepped up to the open side of the building. The instant she felt an aura from inside the building, she flinched and froze in place, her instincts screaming danger. She blasted out her senses, but the building remained uncannily impenetrable, even with the open wall. All she could sense from it was the barest touch on an aura. She would have to go inside to properly examine.

Soramir had never told Liara what he had seen in Jason’s aura, but the way Soramir treated him once they had met was extremely telling. Something had earned the respect and, she suspected, even the wariness of the Storm Kingdom’s first and most powerful ancestor. Hoping she was about to realise at least a part of what he had seen, Liara continued into the cloud house.

SLOPPY MISTAKE

LIARA WAS FLOODED WITH A STRANGE SENSATION THE MOMENT she stepped fully inside Jason Asano's cloud house. There was a sense of oppression, which only heightened as the open wall closed behind her, sealing her in. The aura pervading the place wasn't exactly stronger than Jason's own, but it felt somehow richer and deeper. It was as if she were extending her senses into a body of water, discovering mysterious depths and untold dangers she was previously oblivious to.

While the sensations the pervasive aura engendered were strange, they were also familiar. It took her a moment to realise why. Jason quietly watched her take it in, amusement teasing the corner of his lips. When she realised where she recognised the sensation from, her eyes went wide.

He flashed a grin. "There it is."

Liara alternated watching Jason with looking around the room as if it were a giant beast that had swallowed her. Jason moved to a drinks cabinet, poured some amber liquid into a glass then brought it over to Liara, who downed it at a gulp.

"I should stock cheaper booze," Jason said, frowning at the empty glass she handed back. "How much did Soramir tell you about me?"

"Almost nothing," she said. "He believes that your secrets are yours."

"And his."

"He only did that because you represented a potentially unknown threat."

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“Asano, I don’t know what he saw in you, I genuinely don’t. But I’ve never even heard of a diamond-ranker treating a silver like he does you.”

“And how is that?”

“Like a peer. He thinks you’re going to join him at diamond-rank, someday, and whatever he saw in your soul was enough to start showing you at least some of the respect that entails already.”

She panned her eyes over the house around her yet again.

“I may finally be starting to see why.”

Jason threw the glass at the cabinet, where it was cushioned by the cloud-stuff from which the cabinet was made. The cloud-substance cleansed the glass using the crystal wash infused into it then returned the glass to its place.

“How is this possible?” Liara asked.

“The cabinet? It’s pretty basic cloud furniture stuff.”

“No, the... is it even really an aura that this place has? Is this cloud house a temple to you?”

“No,” Jason said with a chuckle. “It employs the same mechanisms, magically speaking, but I’m not in the club, as it were. It’s not holy ground; it just really, really belongs to me. It’s part of my territory. Outside of these walls, the Storm King rules. Inside them is my domain. Think of it as an embassy.”

“Oh, so you’re not claiming to be a god; you’re claiming to be a one-man sovereign nation.”

“I didn’t say anything about it being one-man. What I did say is that it’s an embassy. The nation is somewhere else.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“You’re a king in your world?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Jason said. “When I was saving my world, I accidentally created a country with a couple of territories. Not large ones, but there are smaller

countries. Only two smaller countries, but they're pretty notable ones. Lots of rich people, although in the smallest one, they pretend they aren't and try to distract people with hats."

"Hats?"

"Yep. Lots of robe-wearing too, which you don't see a lot of in my world. Not the practical Jedi-style stuff like I wear either. Well, Sith, let's be honest."

"Mr Asano," Shade said emerging from Jason's shadow. "Your proclivities are showing."

"Shade, it's fine."

"You know that Miss Hurin doesn't like you explaining things to people."

"Hey, you brought the princess here."

"Not for this, Mr Asano."

Jason looked at his familiar thoughtfully, then gestured Liara to a chair.

"Alright," he said as he took a seat for himself.

"Just before the explanations come to an end," Liara said, "why would you let me in here? Even if it's just a glimpse, it's a big secret you're letting me in on."

"Soramir knows," Jason said. "Trenchant Moore has some inkling, I'm pretty sure. If three people know a thing, it's not a secret anymore."

"That's true enough," Liara said. "There has to be more to it than that, though."

"Yes," Jason acknowledged. "Shade brought you here."

"And that's enough?"

"Yes," Jason said as if it were obvious.

"He didn't tell you why, though. Or that we were coming at all."

"No."

“I know he’s your familiar, but there’s a difference between trusting your familiar and blindly trusting their judgement.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” Jason said. “If it were Gordon bringing you here, it would probably be to watch old musicals, which is not a sufficient reason.”

“Musicals?”

“A crystal recording of people acting out stories, like a theatre show, with lots of singing.”

“Isn’t Gordon your familiar with the floating death orbs? I looked those up and the little I could find about them was both unconfirmed and terrifying. The only accurate information the Magic Society had was their iron- and bronze-rank abilities, as detailed by Clive Standish based on your familiar.”

“Clive’s a good egg. It’s a damn shame the way he was treated, but this is why I’m wary of institutionalised power.”

“And this familiar would bring me here to watch stories acted out with singing?”

“It could be worse, believe me. When he and Taika get together... let’s just say that you should try and avoid learning who Michael Dudikoff is.”

“Who’s Michael Dudikoff?”

“A real estate agent.”

“Mr Asano...”

“Come on, Shade. She asked.”

“No one asks about Michael Dudikoff, Mr Asano.”

“He’s no Jan Michael Vincent, that’s for sure.”

“Mr Asano, I brought her here because she is facing some of the same issues you did in your world and I thought she could benefit from your experience.”

The half-smirk froze on Jason’s face as Shade continued.

“She finds herself confronted by a sprawling organisation whose agenda is incredibly destructive, but she lacks the

effective means to pursue them, even after the terrible price they and their allies have made everyone pay. I imagined you might be able to relate.”

“Oh,” Jason said with a grimace. “That. Yeah.”

“What did you go through in your world?” Liara asked. “His Ancestral Majesty didn’t tell me any secrets he uncovered, but he did talk around certain things. He said there were things inside your soul that even he didn’t recognise or understand. That whatever you faced in your world must have been extraordinary.”

“The problem was that it only had two adventurers on it,” Jason said. “There were essence users, but it’s not the same. Their mindset was formed on the sensibilities of their world and they weren’t equipped to handle the trouble brought from yours.”

“You called it ‘their world,’ not ‘my world,’” Liara said.

“It’s not my world.”

“Aren’t you a king there? Or whatever more complicated than a king is?”

“You’ve researched me. What do you think my general opinion of kings is?”

“So you walked away?”

“I didn’t abandon it. It has people and leadership. Better than what I could have done myself.”

“And you weren’t tempted to stay?”

“That world isn’t my home. I spent a long time learning that lesson. In any case, I had responsibilities that precluded me from acting how I would desire. It forced me to work with people I would much rather not. Many had become enemies, but there were larger needs.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Your problem,” Jason said. “I do understand it. When you’re fighting monsters, or hunting individuals, which I believe you did for a long time, then things are simpler. Even

with an enemy like the Builder's forces, it may have been a skirmish war, for the most part, but they were still an enemy we could go out and fight. But this Purity group isn't looking to take the fight to us. Their raid on the island was the first time they came at us directly and even that was a decoy action while they went for their real objectives. They have powerful backers and what feels like bottomless resources. What they want doesn't require them to fight us; their agendas are hard to pin down yet have catastrophic outcomes should we fail to stop them."

"That's a fairly good summation of how I'm feeling about the current situation."

"I know how I felt when I faced these challenges in the past. You see what's happening and feel unequipped to handle it. The enemy is everywhere and nowhere, disappearing like smoke. The inability to pin them down and score decisive victories leaves you feeling helpless."

Jason turned, staring off into space for a moment.

"I have a simple philosophy for accomplishing my goals," he said. "You look at where you are, where you want to be, and then decide if you're willing to pay the price of walking between those two points. Almost anything can be accomplished if you have the resolve, but you have to be able to see the path."

"I don't see it."

Jason nodded.

"That's where the helplessness comes from, and it's like a poison. It crawls into your mind and whispers that no matter how powerful you become, it will never be enough. The enemies will always be too hidden, their backers too powerful. Your frustration becomes anger and you want to let that anger loose because it feels like it will make you strong."

"Which it never does," Liara said. "Anger tells you lies. That there are simple, clean solutions. It smothers your judgement and makes you weak."

The pair shared a look of silent understanding.

“So, what do I do?” she asked. “How do I find the path I can’t see?”

“There is no answer but hurry up and wait,” Jason told her. “You’re being diligent and tapping every resource. We have to keep using every tool we have and hope the path becomes clear before we all pay the price.”

“Is that how you stopped the enemies in your world?”

“I didn’t stop the enemies in my world. We got the catastrophic outcomes I was talking about. The most I could do was stop the world from being annihilated entirely. As for the group, they collapsed after their work was done. Their people didn’t realise how grand a disaster they were bringing about until after the fact.”

“That doesn’t sound encouraging.”

“Encouragement you can get from your friends; it’s not why Shade brought you here. He brought you here so you could talk to someone who understands. I can tell you something about my experiences if you’d like. Maybe we can figure out what I did wrong and how to do it better this time.”

“I would appreciate that.”

Jason took Liara through some edited highlights of his time on Earth. Mostly he described the Engineers of Ascension and their takedown of the grid, only touching briefly on the disasters that followed. Primarily, he talked about the timing leading up to that, the signs he missed and the mistakes he made.

“...like trying to wipe out an ant’s nest by stomping ants one at a time. You’ll never get them all that way, and you’ll never destroy the nest, no matter how powerful you are. The more powerful you are, in fact, the more powerless you will feel without an appropriate place to apply that power. Until you have somewhere to direct that energy, the sense of helplessness will only grow.”

“And what should I do about that?”

“For one thing, don’t let it leak into other things you do. The need to feel like you have power over something can lead to making bad choices. Killing when you should let someone live. Making threats instead of peace; hurting yourself by being domineering when being friendly would have gotten you everything you want without complication.”

He gave her a sad smile.

“I know that’s more what to avoid, but the unfortunate truth is that there isn’t a lot to actively do. All I can really tell you is to suck it up and stay focused, which is the real trick. Be conscious of your state of mind. I let things get away from me and paid the price for that. Something as simple as having someone who understands to talk about it with can help with that, so why don’t we start now? I’ve talked you through my experiences, so how about you tell me about yours?”

“This is all new to me,” Liara said. “The Builder response office has had the Purity issues added to its plate now the Builder affairs are mostly mop-up. It’s a very different fight, though. We knew what the Builder cult wanted and what they would need to do to get it. It was a fight. With Purity, we’re reaching under cupboards to grab at scurrying insects.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “While I am loath to interrupt, Miss Wexler will be contacting you presently on an issue I believe warrants immediate attention. Further, you may wish to include Lady Liara.”

Liara was already familiar with Jason’s chat functions from the expedition to the Builder island, so there was no need to explain, as Sophie’s voice chat arrived and Jason both joined and invited Liara to join.

“Why did you bring the princess in on this?” Sophie asked without greeting or preamble.

“We happened to be talking when you contacted me and it seemed like a good idea,” Jason said.

“Jason, I know you think the blue hair thing is sexy—”

“Hey...” Jason said, cutting her off.

“I’m just saying that you can’t just randomly bring people in on team business.”

“It was at my suggestion that Lady Liara was included, Miss Sophie.”

“Oh, that’s alright then,” Sophie said.

“Wait,” Jason said. “If I do it, it’s because I’m wrapped around some lady’s finger; if Shade suggests it, it’s a sensible choice?”

“Yes,” Sophie said bluntly.

“That’s a little hurtful.”

“Asano, it’s a matter of judgement.”

“I’ll have you know that—”

“Mr Asano,” Shade interrupted. “I will remind you that we have company, as well as that Miss Sophie has some news that should be addressed.”

“Alright,” Jason said reluctantly, “but I’m going to be coming back to this issue. I won’t be so easily distracted.”

“What’s for dinner tonight?” Sophie asked.

“Oh, that’s going to be great,” Jason said. “I’m cooking almost everything in palm leaves. I’ve got this—”

“Mr Asano?” Shade said pointedly.

“What? Oh, sorry, Shade. What did you call about, Wexler?”

“I just got jumped by a bunch of silver-rank thugs.”

“Purity worshippers?” Liara asked.

“Not exactly,” Sophie said. “These were local hires, from a city called Casallini.”

“In Giralano,” Liara said bitterly. “That whole country is a stain full of drug dealers and smugglers.”

“A wretched hive of scum and villainy?” Jason asked.

“Don’t answer that,” Sophie told her. “That’s his ‘I’m talking some nonsense you won’t understand for my own

amusement' voice.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” Jason said, the picture of confused innocence.

“Perhaps we should stay on topic,” Liara suggested. “Miss Wexler, are you certain these men were from Casallini?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sophie said. “I put the hard question on the survivors once I was done.”

“How many were there?” Jason asked.

“Eight, but they were raw garbage. No training, no experience, reeking of cores. They were a local gang of toughs hired to come after me specifically.”

“They knew you were coming?”

“And what did you mean when you said they weren't exactly Purity worshippers?” Liara added.

“Yeah, they knew I was coming. I questioned the survivors and they cracked pretty quick. These weren't zealots, just a local gang. They were hired by some Purity loyalists. They're waiting for these guys to bring me to them, so I say we get the team together, drop down on them like a pallet of marble bricks and scoop them up.”

“No!” Jason and Liara exclaimed simultaneously, then looked at each other, slightly surprised.

“Why not?” Sophie asked.

“It's a trap,” Jason said. “Those Purity worshippers are a worm on a hook.”

“Exactly,” Liara said. “The Order of Redeeming Light have been extremely diligent about keeping their operations informationally secure. If they made a sloppy mistake all of a sudden, giving us an unexpected opportunity, it's almost certainly a lure.”

“I doubt they're even really Purity people,” Jason said. “Probably another level of cut-out. The order will be sore about exposing themselves after losing people while raiding the island just a couple of days ago.”

“I’ll send civic forces from the Storm Kingdom to sweep them up, rather than the Adventure Society,” Liara said. “It makes more sense diplomatically and won’t tap the society’s already too-thin resources. Plus, we have a large force in Casallini because it’s a border city, so we can move faster and with people who know the area. In the meantime, Miss Wexler, I’m using my authority within the Adventure Society to order a stop on your contract. It’s low-priority, so no one will be missing any desperately needed supplies.”

“I can finish it,” Sophie said.

“I’m not taking any unnecessary risks,” Liara said. “They have a taste for grabbing adventurers and they clearly know your schedule. Get back to Rimaros. Your contract is cancelled.”

CRITERIA

A PORTAL POWER AT JASON'S CURRENT RANK OF SILVER FOUR had a base range of two thousand and four hundred kilometres, which was true for every portal or long-range teleport ability. Jason was able to eke out some extra range because of the various effects connecting him to the astral, although it was relatively marginal and he hadn't tested just how far he could push the limit. It wasn't a match for a true portal specialist but was close to the upper end of what celestines could accomplish. Like Jason, they had an affinity for dimensional energies that likewise made them naturally adept with dimensional powers.

Jason's normal shadow jump range was line of sight. When moving from one Shade body to another, however, he could travel at long-range teleportation distances, albeit at the range for a teleport power a full rank lower than normal. This was unimpressive on its own except for two key factors. Jason's shadow jump didn't have a cooldown, which was exceptional enough, but insignificant compared to the second benefit. So long as there was a Shade body at the destination, Jason did not need to have been to that destination before.

The need to teleport to known locations was, along with range, one of the iconic restrictions on portal travel. It was arguably the most widely known essence ability restriction of all. While abilities that extended range were common enough amongst portal users, circumventing the need to visit a destination was significantly harder. Jason's ability to do so may have been at less than a tenth of his normal portal range, yet remained noteworthy enough that he had been very careful

about letting anyone know. He was relatively certain that even Soramir remained unaware of it.

Liara did feel better after her talk with Jason. He was younger than her children, but the similarity of their experiences gave them a shared empathy that helped Liara cope. When it wasn't possible to fix a situation, at least not immediately, it felt good having someone who could truly understand and didn't make a futile attempt to fix it.

After returning to Livaros, Liara immediately cancelled Sophie's contract, as promised. She notified the Adventure Society and the civic authorities about the people in the city of Casallini and orders were immediately sent to deploy forces. Liara was a princess, if only of a minor branch of the royal family, and also a high-level Adventure Society official. When she suggested a course of action, people took the request seriously and acted on it quickly.

After that was done, Liara returned to her temporary office. Her assistant, Rodney, was in the outer office, sorting through reports of suspected Purity activity to deliver to her later.

"Rodney, contact Cassin Amouz and ask for another meeting. Let him know that I'll come to him and that I intend to apologise for my behaviour during our previous meeting."

"With respect, Lady Liara, are you certain? I couldn't help but overhear your rather loud discussion with Lord Amouz and he was definitely attempting to make inappropriate use of his influence."

"His son is in the hands of zealots known for performing weird rituals on people," Liara said. "If it were one of my sons, I'd burn this building to the ground if there was even a chance it would help bring him back to me. What Lord Amouz needs is to know that everything that can be done is being done. Otherwise, he'll do something drastic."

"Like burn this building to the ground," Rodney said, realisation dawning on his expression.

“Exactly. So, I’d appreciate you setting up that meeting sooner, rather than later.”

“Of course, Lady Liara.”

Liara entered the inner office. The desk had been repaired from when she smashed it, but all the books, records and other files had been piled on top of it in who knew what order. She sat down to methodically re-collate everything.

Once she was done, she resumed the laborious task of poring over observation reports, activity logs, contract summaries and portal itineraries. The goal was still to identify the portal user responsible for extracting the clockwork kings from the Builder island.

During their conversation, Liara had consulted with Jason, as another portal user, about the one she was looking for. Like Liara, he had been present on the island, and with sufficiently powerful aura senses to get some idea of what happened.

They had talked through the specifics of what they had seen, and while Jason didn’t reveal that he had a trick to circumnavigate destination requirements himself, he pointed out that same ability in their unknown enemy.

Liara’s head was significantly clearer after taking time to relax and get some of the concerns off her chest. She hadn’t slept since coming back from the expedition, or during the expedition itself. She was more than capable of enduring, but that didn’t stop her head from feeling like it contained an angry swarm of bees.

Now with a clearer head, Liara realised that she should have recognised what Jason pointed out herself. Her inability to focus had cost her in concentration and the ability to connect information.

After reorganising the records, she resumed her search with renewed focus, making a list of essence users that met specific criteria. She based those criteria on what she and Jason had been able to sense during the Builder island expedition.

Liara had been paying special attention to the area around the forge room where the constructs were being created by Builder automatons. The chamber itself was impenetrable to aura senses, which also blocked portals. Liara had sensed the portal open outside the chamber and the clockwork kings and essence users that went through. That told her quite a lot in and of itself.

It had to be a gold-rank portal, and not just a silver-ranker's portal power pushed to the limit. A silver-ranker who had reached gold with their portal power specifically could only portal a single gold-ranker. Moving two gold-rank clockwork kings and silver-rankers besides meant a gold-rank portal user. Further, no gold-rank essence user's aura had been present. Even a stealth specialist like Liara would have needed to reveal her aura to use a portal power. That meant the portal user was not present and had opened the portal from a distant location.

This allowed Liara to surmise further things about the portal user. Unless the portal user belonged to the Builder cult, it was unlikely that they had ever been to the depths of the Builder island. For one thing, if they'd known the clockwork kings were there, they would have been and gone long before the expedition and not needed to distract the adventurers by sacrificing so many of their forces.

Another supporting factor was the fact that the Purity worshippers had gone down there themselves instead of portalling in the same way they portalled out. This suggested a condition had needed to be met before the portal could be opened. This reinforced the idea that the portal user had never been there, although the widespread destruction within the underground complex may have broken the portal user's ability to employ that destination.

Portal users needed to have visited a location before they could open a portal to it. This allowed their senses to attune to the aura of the place, like examining spiritual landmarks. If a sufficiently drastic event severely reshaped the physical space, the spiritual space would often follow, changing it too much to serve as a destination until the place was visited once again. If

a portal destination was on a mountain, some diamond-ranker destroying the mountain would almost certainly eliminate the destination point.

Liara had sensed a strange burst of aura shortly before the departure of the Purity worshippers. She was fairly certain that it was some kind of aura beacon that had served as a target destination for the portal the gold-ranker opened from afar.

Liara was familiar with such beacons. They could be sensed in the immediate area, but also by linked devices from hundreds of kilometres away. Her husband had a similar beacon, based on the same basic design, as an emergency signal should he require his wife to come and save him. Fortunately, she had never needed to rescue him from anything more dangerous than his mother.

With Gibson Amouz in the hands of the Purity worshippers, Liara was worried about her husband. He was originally part of the Amouz family and was currently managing an underwater mining operation. Their marriage was more political than loving, but she still deeply cared about him. If nothing else, while their children might be grown, she didn't want them losing their father.

The criteria she developed gave Liara a profile that she could apply to known essence users, resulting in a list of names. She went through all the records she had on each name until she reached the end of the list. She was then left with a problem: none of the people on her list could have done it, according to Adventure Society records. Itineraries tracking Adventure Society members and reports tracking outsiders always marked the people on her list as either busy with society duties, confirmed as active elsewhere or on the far side of the planet.

That was not to say the records were perfect. Mistakes were made. Rogue adventurers had many secrets. It really could be a Builder cult portal expert who stayed behind to assist their allies, or some completely unknown outsider. They were less likely scenarios as the details didn't add up quite right, but still possibilities. If that was the case, there was

nothing Liara could do to find them, so she dismissed them as possibilities for any practical purpose.

Liara was betting that there was an issue with the records. The Adventure Society was the single most elaborate bureaucracy in the history of civilisation, meaning that issue more likely than not stemmed from incompetence or corruption. She was confident that someone on the list of names, through luck or design, had their true activities covered up.

“Rodney!”

Rodney entered the inner office.

“I have arranged a meeting with Lord Amouz for tomorrow, Lady Liara.”

“Great. Contact Jana and get her in here.”

“Of course, milady. Any preference on time-frame?”

“Now.”

“Wexler,” Jason said as he popped out of her shadow. They were on a rooftop above the streets of the small city of Casallini.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I came to ask you the same question. Why are you in the city?”

“First, I came here to hand over the guys I captured to the Storm Kingdom forces at the border station.”

“That would have been the border station at the city gates.”

“Now I have to sell the land skimmer I took off those guys. It’s a nice one; should be worth a bit.”

“You’ll have to explain this to me,” Jason said. “You’re saying that you went to the border station and handed your prisoners over to the border guards from Rimaros. That’s why

you came to the city instead of returning to Rimaros, the way you were meant to.”

“Yes.”

“And then you decided to sell their skimmer since they were dead or locked up.”

“Exactly.”

“Did this land skimmer come with one of those specialised dimensional bags to store it?”

“No.”

“So you parked it somewhere?”

“That’s right.”

Jason walked to the edge of the roof and looked down.

“Generously-spaced streets,” he observed.

“So?”

“So, I’m having a lot of trouble understanding what I imagine will be a key element to the scenario at hand. Namely that, if your intention was to sell off the land skimmer, then not actually taking it with you is an unconventional approach. Instead of driving the land skimmer to a dealership where they would pay you for it, you seem to have left the land skimmer behind and taken to the rooftops.”

“There are a lot of ins and outs to negotiation,” Sophie said. “It gets complex. Takes you places you didn’t expect to go. Like rooftops.”

“Does the bloody hammer you’re holding constitute an in or an out?”

The bloody-headed construction hammer in Sophie’s hand went spinning out of sight over the edge of the roof.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said.

“Sophie, you can’t go after them yourself.”

“I’m not.”

“Or reconnoitre them.”

“I have no idea what that word means.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Okay, I bumped into one guy, but he wasn’t even involved. This is a lawless town full of crappy guys that will stop repairing their roof to attack the first woman that arrives on it.”

“You landed on the roof of what was presumably his home,” Jason said. “He probably thought you were trying to rob or kill him.”

“I don’t have a lot of experience with murdering people,” Sophie said. “Killing, yes, but not murdering. Even then, I’m fairly certain that people who think they’re about to get murdered don’t lick their lips a whole bunch while talking about buttering up your flanks.”

“Really? Okay, that does sound creepy.”

“I’ve seen that look in men before. It’s something that goes beyond want, through need and into something else. A hunger for something it’s very wrong to be hungry for. I’ve seen that look, back in Greenstone. Cole Silva and the hammer guy both had it coming.”

“We’ve all got it coming, Wexler.”

“That’s the truth,” she agreed.

Jason opened a portal.

“Time to go,” he told her.

“I’m not your nubile slave girl anymore, Asano. You don’t get to order me around.”

“I got to order you around? I should have done that more. I could have made you do my laundry.”

“The cloud house does your laundry.”

“It’s the principle of the thing. Besides, I do still get to order you around.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep. So get in the portal.”

“What makes you think I have to do what you say?”

“You don’t, that’s fine,” Jason said. “I’ll let you explain to the others why we’re having spirit coins for dinner.”

“Well, that’s just playing dirty,” Sophie muttered and made her way through the portal.

A MATTER OF VALUES

BELINDA REPEATEDLY THWAPPED AT SOPHIE'S HEAD WITH A softcover notebook as Sophie fended her off with her arms. As Sophie shifted in her seat under the attacks, the puppy napping in her lap made a grumbling sound.

“What were you thinking, running off by yourself into some trap?” Belinda scolded as she dropped into a cloud chair and jabbed the notebook in Jason's direction. “This guy was the one who had to bring you back. This guy! Have you learned nothing from the mistakes he keeps making, over and over?”

“Hey...”

“He's been kidnapped, tortured, killed. Forced to wear those shirts.”

“What's wrong with my shirts?”

“Didn't you just get a whole wardrobe put together?” Neil asked. “You still dress like a tropical garden was violently ill.”

Jason's team was gathered in the cloud house. In the wake of the Purity church's attempt to trap Sophie, the team was placed on standby under the direction of the Builder response unit, which was in the process of being reorganised. First formed in response to the original wave of Builder cult activity, it now had anti-Purity operations rolled into its purview.

The head of what was now being called the Office of Organised Enemy Response was the same as when it had been the Builder response unit: Ramon Keel. After Liara had

reported on Sophie's encounter, he had cancelled all the contracts Jason's team were currently assigned. He ordered them to go on standby, which they were allowed to do at the cloud house. Keel had also sent someone who was apparently on the way to debrief Sophie.

In the meantime, the team was lounging around on an open deck. They were upbraiding Sophie for her recklessness, which she felt was unfair with Jason sitting right there.

"Mr Asano has paid the price for his risk-taking more than once," Shade pointed out. "More importantly, so have the people around him—yourself included, Miss Wexler."

"Not everyone gets to come back for another go-around after they get clipped," Neil said. "If Jason gets killed again, it's probably fine, but we'd rather keep you around."

"Much rather," Humphrey said. He was already sharing a couch with Sophie but shuffled a little closer.

"Is no one going to reject the idea of me getting killed being alright?" Jason asked.

"What about the plan you're working on?" Sophie asked Belinda. "That's much riskier than taking a quick peek at some enemies."

"It's a calculated risk," Belinda said. "Also, it's our plan, not an enemy's. That's very different from looking at a trap and wandering in of my own volition."

"She isn't wrong about the dangers, though," Humphrey said. "Any time you want to back out, we'll all support you."

"More than if you go through with it, in fact," Clive said. "I'm still against it."

"It probably won't even happen," Belinda said. "The chance necessary to make it work isn't ever likely to present itself."

"It seems more likely now that we're being kept on standby," Humphrey said. "It seems the Adventure Society wants to use us against the Purity worshippers."

“They’re just giving in to the inevitable,” Neil said. “Jason always ends up in the middle whenever some insane thing happens. Interdimensional invasions, a city sinking into the ocean. Some god going insane and trying to turn the moon into a giant biscuit.”

“Giant biscuit?” Puppy-Stash asked, picking up his head with a sleepy expression. Sophie scratched him behind the ears and he contentedly settled.

Jason and Clive were in the waterfall room, working on their special project when Jason sensed a presence outside the cloud house. It was a gold-rank stealth specialist, so Jason hadn’t sensed him until he revealed his aura. Jason didn’t recognise it, but the arrival of whoever it was left Sophie disturbed. She and Rufus had been sparring on the grass beside the river, watched by the neighbourhood children. The moment the new aura appeared, Jason felt anger flood into her aura, and she stormed into the cloud house.

One of Shade’s bodies approached the visitor and Jason closed his eyes to share his familiar’s vision. It turned out that he didn’t recognise the visitor’s aura because the last time Jason had seen him, his aura senses had been too weak.

Callum Morse was a former teammate of Emir Bahadir, as well as of Rufus’ parents. Jason had met him in Greenstone when he assisted Emir and the early efforts against the Builder. Jason shadow-jumped through Shade to join Rufus and Callum who were talking, but there was an air of awkwardness between them after Sophie’s departure.

“...is working with the Church of the Healer, here in the city,” Rufus was saying as Jason arrived. The two men turned as Jason emerged from Shade’s body.

“Cal,” Jason greeted the newcomer, friendly but with a noticeable reserve in his tone.

“Asano.”

“What brings you to Rimaros?”

“May I come inside so we can talk?”

“I’m afraid not, Cal.”

“Wexler told you about what happened, then.”

“About how you and Emir dangled her as bait, and the moment it turns out her mother is still alive, you shut her down? She might have mentioned it, yeah.”

“There are important developments,” Callum said. “Things best not discussed in the open. We should take this inside.”

“Here’s the thing, Cal,” Jason said. “Sophie doesn’t want you here, and she’s my team. You’re not. So, if she wants you gone, you’re gone. Sorry.”

“This is more important than one person’s feelings,” Callum said, annoyance showing in his expression.

“It always is,” Jason said, his voice relaxed and a little sad. “There’s always someone way more powerful who can’t wait to explain how important things are afoot. How I have to put aside my small concerns to work with someone who screwed me over, because I need to act for the greater good. Is that more or less your pitch?”

Callum frowned.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Jason said. “I’ve been down that road, Cal. Didn’t like where it took me and I’m not letting you lead my team down the same path.”

“Asano—”

“We’re silver-rankers, Cal. I’ve done my time punching above my weight and I’ve lost people doing it. You have gold-rank problems; go find some gold-rankers to help you.”

“I know where Wexler’s mother is.”

Jason’s eyebrows rose.

“Is that so?”

“Not exactly, but enough to find her, if Wexler is willing to participate.”

“Where is her mother, Cal?”

“It’s complicated. We should go somewhere private and discuss it. If not your cloud house, then—”

“It’s not complicated, Cal. Maybe on your end, but on mine, it’s nice and simple. At the end of this conversation, you’ll either be the guy who knew where Sophie’s mother was and told us, or the guy who knew and didn’t.”

Callum’s shoulders slumped slightly.

“You used to have higher ideals, Asano.”

“Yep.”

“What happened to you?”

“I lived up to them.”

Jason stepped into Shade’s body and vanished.

In an office in the Temple of the Healer, Arabelle Remore looked up as Callum Morse entered.

“Cal,” Arabelle said as she got up and came around the desk to collect her old teammate in a quick hug. “What are you doing here during a surge? I would have thought you’d be hunting monsters and cultists, barely stopping to sleep.”

“You know that I’ve been investigating the Order of the Reaper.”

“You’re still doing that?”

She guided him to a seat in the consulting office she had been assigned.

“Yes,” Callum told her. “They are a more dangerous organisation than people realise. They always have been, since their inception.”

Arabelle narrowed her eyes.

“This isn’t just you helping Emir, is it?”

“This is bigger than Emir.”

“There are things you’re not telling me, Cal. That makes it hard to help you.”

“I need this, Belle,” he said, his voice slightly cracking.

Callum had been hard to read as long as Arabelle had known him, so seeing desperation in his expression, even for a moment, was startling.

“What *are* you willing to tell me?”

“I went to speak with Sophie Wexler.”

“She’s talking to you now?”

“No,” Callum said. “Her anger is foolish. Pursuing her mother meant getting involved with the Order of the Reaper. Doing so at bronze rank would have meant nothing but a swift death.”

“You’re probably right, Cal. But you and Emir put her on that path. You dangled something precious in front of her. Something that she’s never had and thought she never would. Then you told her that not only can she not have it, but that it’s hidden and she’s not allowed to look for it. I’d say her anger is completely justified.”

“She’s angry that we kept her from certain death.”

“We all have emotions that drive us, Cal. Even you. Are you going to stand there and tell me you aren’t being driven by them right now?”

“Yes, I have feelings, Belle. I just don’t let them compromise my judgement.”

“Even if that were true, Cal, you can’t expect everyone else to meet that standard. People don’t work like that.”

“Some of them should. Some of them need to. I attempted to engage her team but was rebuffed by Jason Asano. I need to you help me get past him. If I can just talk to Wexler... should I approach another member of their team? Do it away from the cloud house?”

“No, Cal. You’ll only make them reject you all the more.”

“As I said: compromised judgement.”

Arabelle looked at him with an indulgent smile.

“It’s a matter of values, Cal. What matters to you might not matter to them, and the same is true from their perspective.”

“Asano refused to listen long enough to learn how important what I need them for is.”

Arabelle burst out laughing.

“I can imagine how that went,” she said. “Some variation of go find some gold-rankers to help you?”

“Yes. What is happening with Asano? His cloud house is bizarre. It’s completely different compared to Emir’s.”

“Jason and Emir have moments where they are quite alike, but are also very different. This is especially true in the directions their paths are taking them, which is precisely the obstacle you’re facing. You’re the latest in a line of powerful people trying to tell Jason what to do. Not only does that inherently rankle him, but if he’s standing up to gods and great astral beings, he’s hardly going to let you push him around.”

“Back in Greenstone, he had the resolve to do what was necessary. What was right. He lost that in his time away. Became selfish.”

The amusement passed from Arabelle’s face and the flint in the tone of her next words arrested his attention.

“Cal, I know I’ve given you many pieces of advice, but you should listen very carefully to this one: Do not test Jason Asano’s resolve. He reached a point where it was all he had left and he’s just starting to heal from that. I don’t know what the future holds for him, but I’ve seen the other fish in his pond. If he grows up the wrong way, I suspect we will all come to regret it.”

“Really, Belle? You believe in destiny, now?”

“Do you know who Soramir Rimaros is, Cal?”

“I do.”

“There’s a friend of Jason. Soramir Rimaros seems to be the only one who fully understands who she is, and she scares him.”

“Who is she?”

“Dawn. She is or, I gather, was the First Sister of the Order of the World-Phoenix. I’m not sure what that means exactly... Cal?”

Callum was shivering in his seat.

“Are you sure that’s right?” he asked, his voice barely a whisper. “First Sister?”

“Yes. She told me that it’s very important that I help Jason get better.”

“Then do it,” Callum said. “Are you saying this woman is here?”

“She’s been staying in the royal palace. What does this First Sister business mean?”

“That whatever is going on is bigger than just our world.”

“I knew that already. You asked what happened to Asano. His entire world was in danger and he was stuck saving it because everyone else either couldn’t or wouldn’t.”

“He said he was tired of powerful people telling him what to do. I thought he meant gold-rankers.”

“No, Cal. When he looks at gold-rankers, he’s not looking up. If you came to him and told him to put aside his values and concerns to do what you tell him, you should count yourself lucky he didn’t let you into his cloud house. You might not have come back out.”

“He can’t be that strong.”

“He’s put a lot of trust in me, but I’m certain that he hasn’t told me all his secrets. What he has told me is that there’s a power that he has only just begun to tap into.”

Callum ran a hand over his face, eyes unfocused as he was lost in thought.

“Why does whatever you need have to involve Asano’s team?” Arabelle asked him.

“Because of Wexler’s mother. She’s here, in the Sea of Storms.”

“Oh, Cal. That’s thin ice you’re looking to walk out onto.”

“So I’m beginning to realise.”

Arabelle let out a sigh.

“If you want my help, Cal, then you need to tell me why finding Sophie’s mother means so much to you. Really why. If I think you’re lying to me or holding back, you’ll get nothing from me.”

“We should talk about Cal,” Rufus said to Jason.

“I know, right?” Jason said. “I’m assuming you’re talking about my awesome exit line for that conversation. Mic drop, disappear into shadows. Such a boss move.”

“Who’s Mike?”

A LITTLE DAMAGE

SOPHIE AND HUMPHREY SAT IN CLOUD CHAIRS FACING ONE another, leaning forward with her hands held in his.

“You know he’s going to come back,” Humphrey said. “We have some decisions to make. We always intended to go looking for your mother once we hit silver rank. Of course, Clive’s little dam investigation turned out to be a bit more involved than we thought, then Jason...”

He gave her a reassuring smile.

“I’ve already discussed the search for your mother with the others. We were going to do it as a team as soon as the monster surge was over.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I wanted the first thing you knew about it to be everyone telling you that of course they’d help you. I’ve seen how much that kind of support has helped Jason, and he seems to have picked up on some of your traits in his time away.”

“And what’s wrong with my traits?”

Humphrey wasn’t the expert that Belinda was, but even he could see a trap that obvious.

“Nothing at all,” he said. “All your traits are perfectly charming.”

She leaned in for a gentle kiss.

“You are a terrible liar.”

Her predatory smile was replaced with a frown as she remembered what they had been talking about. “What are we going to do about Callum?”

“We need to make some decisions,” Humphrey said. “And by we, I mean you. Starting with if we are going to hear him out.”

“It doesn’t seem like he’ll just leave us alone if we ignore him.”

“We can let Jason play guard dog. He’s the only silver-ranker I’ve seen who looks at a gold-ranker causing him trouble and is just relieved it’s not a diamond-ranker or worse.”

Sophie chuckled, then gave Humphrey a worried smile.

“He knows something,” she said. “But he wants something too. I don’t want to find her on his terms, but is that just being prideful?”

“It’s not *just* being prideful. We already know that what he wants isn’t what you want. To him, your mother is a means to whatever end he’s looking for.”

Sophie nodded.

“Last time we got pulled into this on someone else’s terms, we got pushed back out once they were done with us.”

She stood and walked to the window, looking out over the cliff and the lagoon below.

“I want to know what Callum knows,” she said. “I just don’t want to do whatever he wants to get that information.”

“Alright then,” Humphrey said, also standing.

Sophie turned to look at him. “It sounds like you know what to do. I still don’t.”

“You want to learn what Callum knows without agreeing to do anything for him,” Humphrey said. “So, that’s what we’ll do.”

“And how do you suggest we accomplish that?”

“I figured we could point Jason at it and stand back.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“Probably not. But remember that when the Builder wanted to stop us and Jason wanted to stop the Builder, Jason won. If he’s determined to do something, I’m not sure he can be stopped. It’s just a question of how much damage he does in the process. I watched him throw himself off a building and die because that’s what it took to stop the Builder.”

Sophie grimaced, recalling that she’d been unconscious at the time from overdrawing her power with a spirit coin. Then her serpentine smile returned and she sidled forward, reaching up to slip her arms around Humphrey’s neck.

“It won’t be that bad this time,” she said. “I can live with a little damage.”

For most of his career, Vidal Ladiv had served as a low-level liaison between the Adventure Society and the Rimaros Civic Authority Council. While the royal family might rule the Storm Kingdom and its capital, the RCAC was the actual government authority that ran Rimaros at almost every level.

Like many essence users, adventurers or not, Vidal had stepped up to do his part during the monster surge. Also like many others, the extra time spent waiting for the surge had primed him for rank-up once it began. While he might have been an Adventure Society functionary, rather than an adventurer himself, he had a respectable record of combat experience.

It had taken him far longer than an adventurer to reach the point of ranking up, having reached bronze during the last monster surge. This did not worry him, however. He was happy to make safe, solid progress through both his ranks and his career. Once the surge started and there was a mad scramble to adapt, he’d gotten plenty of combat experience. Much of it had been guarding airships delivering goods and he had even fought the bold sky pirates that had encroached on

the Storm Kingdom. It was after that epic battle that saw multiple airships wrecked and fall out of the sky, that Vidal had ranked up. Now that he was a freshly minted silver, his career had taken a sudden leap forward.

With his record of excellence, Vidal's rank-up had swiftly led to a promotion from top-level Adventure Society functionary to full Adventure Society official. This was an important transition, akin to a soldier earning their commission and becoming an officer. It moved him from a career track where he had already reached the top to one where he was at the bottom, but like going from peak bronze rank to the bottom of silver, it was an undeniable step up.

At first, Vidal had retained his position as a liaison to the civic authorities but, with the reorganisation of the Builder response unit, he had been moved into the new Office of Organised Enemy Response. While he had done his share of monster hunting during the surge, his chief role in the new department was as an administrator. His combined capability in both fields was what had earned him the move to the new office, with his new role a dynamic mix of being active in the field and actively digging through paperwork.

The new office needed personnel who could hold their own out in the world. People who could navigate regions that wouldn't always be safe. At the current point in time, that meant everywhere. It was an exciting opportunity for Vidal, and he was looking forward to the promised training that would come once the monster surge had died down and the new department was more settled. One of the unspoken tests would be to demonstrate what he could do without haring off to attempt what he was not yet ready for.

Until there was time to provide additional training, new members like Vidal were being assigned tasks that fell within their already established skill sets. For administrative liaison Vidal, that meant a lot of running around the Sea of Storms, contacting various people of interest to the department for non-suspicious reasons. If the people in question were being looked at in a more investigative manner, the Adventure

Society would send someone very different, at least until Vidal gained more experience and training.

In his liaison role, Vidal had spent years meeting with people on behalf of the Adventure Society and the Rimaros government. Over the course of his career, he'd learned a lot about measuring the status of people based on how the society treated them, adventurer or not. Rank was the most obvious factor, with origin, known affiliations and family following close behind. With non-adventurers, it was usually quite easy to place any given person within a social hierarchy.

Adventurers were always the ones who threw out surprises. Guild membership made things easier, but even within guilds and established families, there were no guarantees. Favoured scions fell short while unexpected heroes rose up. What the upper echelons of the Adventure Society thought about any given adventurer was not widely disseminated amongst the low-level officials and functionaries, but Vidal had learned to read the signs.

While there were many nuances that Vidal had come to recognise, some signs were obvious. When he was sent out to debrief an adventurer instead of their being called into the Adventure Society campus, for example, he knew that even if their name was unfamiliar, they were someone to watch.

In the case of Sophie Wexler, the quick background information he called up before setting out to debrief her was revealing. On the face of it, while she might be a silver-ranker and a member of a prestigious foreign guild, that meant less during a monster surge, especially so far from that guild's seat of power in Vitesse. What caught Vidal's eye were her companions.

Wexler's team included several notable individuals, starting with Humphrey Geller. The Gellers were technically aristocracy in some inconsequential city-state somewhere, but their true prestige came from being an adventuring dynasty. Not every Geller turned out exceptional, but only a fool would overlook anyone carrying the name.

Another team member that stood out was Clive Standish—a former member of the Magic Society who had some manner of falling out with that organisation. Vidal was aware of various accommodations the Adventure Society had made to include Standish in collaborations with the Magic Society. This was less overt a move than going out to meet Wexler instead of calling her in, but someone with authority clearly valued Standish highly.

Standish's contention with the Magic Society was noted in his records, although the reasons why were sealed. Someone had pulled strings to get Standish involved in joint projects with the Adventure Society in ways that would not cause him to pull out. Who was pulling those strings also remained a mystery and Vidal knew he was likely better off not finding out. Thus far, only a few minor projects related to astral magic had been affected, but Vidal had been working with bureaucracy for some time. He recognised someone laying groundwork when he saw it. Why a silver-ranker warranted such attention, Vidal had no idea.

The last member of the group stood out the most, at least to Vidal, as the majority of his Adventure Society record was under seal. What information remained was fragmented and often contradictory, including a confirmation notice of his death some three years ago.

Vidal had met Jason Asano before. Vidal had introduced him and his companion—who had also once been confirmed dead—to the monster surge protocols before they even arrived in Rimaros. Jason Asano had been using Vidal to practise some manner of aura disguise technique, which had prompted Vidal to flag him for investigation by the Builder response unit.

Vidal hadn't thought about it anymore until he connected some strange rumours floating around with the man he had met that day. It had prompted him to look closer, putting together some of the rumours with certain things he discovered using records he had access to as a member of the Adventure Society. It pointed to some very high-level meddling in very

low-level contracts; enough of an oddity that he took what he found to the Adventure Society's internal auditing department.

Shortly thereafter, he was politely but firmly directed to stop digging.

As it hadn't been more than a point of curiosity, Vidal had done exactly that, paying no more attention until he was contacted by his friend Rodney. Like Vidal, Rodney had been moved into the new Office of Organised Enemy Response during the reorganisation. Rodney was a purely administrative functionary and lower-ranked than Vidal, both in terms of magic and position. His assignment as assistant to the office's deputy director, Princess Liara Rimaros, gave him a significant level of influence, however.

Rodney had appeared in Vidal's new office and they chatted for a while. Rodney's position had just been changed from a temporary one to a permanent assignment, for which Vidal congratulated him. Rodney gave Vidal his assignment to go debrief Sophie Wexler, which had come directly from the princess instead of the usual pathways.

"Is there anything I need to be aware of, regarding this?" Vidal had asked.

"I'm not sure," Rodney said. "There's still a lot of high-level things I don't know about, but be careful around this adventuring team. There's a lot of people whose attention you do not want landing on you who are quietly putting their attention on this team, despite the nothing contracts they've been on. My advice is to do your job as instructed and don't do anything you weren't instructed to. You'll be reporting directly to the princess on this, and she seems to be social with this Asano character."

"It sounds like I'm being dunked into a mess I don't want any part of."

"You're good at your job, Vidal, which is why that's an accurate assessment."

Vidal didn't need a boat to travel across the water. Instead, he rode an aqueous column of magic from Livaros to Arnote. He could have travelled faster between the islands, now that he had ranked up to silver, but moderated his speed to avoid attracting monsters. When prepping for this debrief, he found a report detailing Wexler's encounter with the reef kraken Zila Rimaros had just gone out to eliminate personally before it affected shipping lanes. As to how Wexler had escaped the gold-rank creature after flying into its path at speed, he had no idea. A reef kraken with its size, speed and power was a well-understood menace in the Sea of Storms.

Arriving at the island of Arnote, Vidal rode his water column into a lagoon. The sleepy town of Palisaros was arrayed along the shore and along the clifftop that bordered the lagoon. He headed for the waterfall, knowing that Wexler's team was staying in a house next to the river spilling over the cliff. The column vanished as Vidal entered the waterfall, which started curving around him without wetting his clothes. He moved up through the waterfall, the invisible bubble around him outlined by the water passing over it.

Most of the way up the cliff, still moving through the waterfall, Vidal stopped after encountering something odd. There was a cave behind the waterfall containing a well-lit chamber that looked to be some kind of magical research room with furniture made out of clouds. Two men watched him floating in the waterfall, unsurprised, as he looked back.

"I guess you'd better come in, then," Jason said.

INFILTRATING THE STRONGHOLD

AFTER SENSING VIDAL'S APPROACH, JASON HAD TAMPED DOWN the aura of the cloud house to hide its nature as a spirit domain. Unlike with the people of Earth, anyone from Pallimustus with aura senses would immediately recognise the similarity to the aura of a temple. Jason couldn't hide that from someone with powerful senses, such as Liara, but with a freshly minted silver, like Vidal, it was viable.

Even so, Vidal obviously sensed something unusual from the way he looked around the place. Jason felt the uncertainty and suspicion in the man's aura. This was an acceptable outcome for Jason, who was happy to leave people a little unnerved. Being off-kilter promoted honest reactions and undermined predetermined intentions.

"I should apologise for the games I was playing last time we met," Jason said as he led Vidal upstairs from the waterfall room. A smile crossed Jason's face as he read Vidal's emotions. This was something Jason was becoming increasingly adept at, using a combination of body language and emotion to assess what people were thinking. Having them a little unnerved made that easier.

Jason was fairly sure that Vidal didn't miss that Jason said he should apologise, without making an actual apology. Once again, the Adventure Society associate proved himself a sharp observer, which impressed Jason. After delivering Vidal to Sophie to conduct the debriefing, Jason went back downstairs to rejoin Clive.

"I like that guy," Jason said. "Maybe I should hire him."

“For what?” Clive asked.

“I don’t know. After he gave me the cloud flask, Emir used to tell me that I should build up a staff. I’m not exactly sure what for, at this stage.”

“You probably shouldn’t go poaching Adventure Society officials when you don’t have anything for them to do.”

“That does sound like sensible advice.”

“You should take it anyway,” Clive said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re kind of famous for choosing the less-than-sensible option, Jason.”

“I always make good choices.”

“Of course you do. Now, let’s go back to figuring out how to use the random stuff you picked up from great astral beings with questionable motives and immediately shoved into your soul.”

The underwater vessels that the Order of Redeeming Light used had been carefully crafted at great expense. The bespoke designs were customised not just for stealth but specifically for operating within the Sea of Storms. By tapping into the natural magical properties of the sea, the silver-rank vessels became far more effective than their already powerful and expensive systems would otherwise be capable of.

Although they were only silver rank, the suppression systems of the vessels were exquisitely crafted. If they came close to one of the magical storms for which the region was named, they could hide from even very powerful gold-rank senses. A diamond-ranker could pick them up, but even they would only do so at a significantly decreased range.

The vessels were not just designed for external security either. Aside from the designated pilot, the suppression systems of the vessel prevented the senses of any passengers

from passing through the windowless hull. Any form of external communication, or even identifying their location, was impossible from within.

Only a small handful of designated pilots knew the locations of the order's various strongholds. Even amongst their number, none of them knew every location, the security protocols or the nature of the defences. Furthermore, the pilots were kept separate from other members of the order, preventing any potential for compromise. They had no friends, no hobbies and no interests—only duty. They rarely even spoke to anyone but the leaders of the various cells of the order.

As a result, the majority of the order was completely unaware of where their most important strongholds were located, regardless of how many times they had visited them. Even the cell leaders were on a need-to-know basis, with the pilots that worked with them still answering to Melody.

The hollowed-out mountain stronghold that Shade had occupied for the last few days had similar protections and restrictions. They were just as effective, if not more so, but were not as expensive. Having much more space to work with and no need to be emplaced on a moving vehicle, it was easier to install defences without the magical elements interfering with one another.

Shade had been dwelling inside the facility for the last few days since infiltrating the stronghold in the shadow of an order member as they left the Builder island. Sneaking around the facility, he was able to learn much about the order and the stronghold, but he had far from free rein. For one thing, there were internal security measures that kept him from the most secure areas of the stronghold. This included the nodes for the stronghold defences, the areas restricted to leadership and certain sensitive infrastructure sections, like the water and air filters that made the underground complex liveable. The other high-security zones were the secure prisoner area and the exits to the stronghold.

Shade's stealth capability was extremely formidable. He was intangible, made of shadows, and the aura strength he

could push through his vessel was strongly affected by the soul of the man who summoned it. Jason's absurd aura strength didn't fully translate to his familiar, but it gave Shade's aura a significant boost. Shade's control of his aura was also superlative.

Despite Shade's prowess, he did not risk triggering the various high-security areas. That meant that he couldn't escape through the air and water filter intakes, or through the underwater tunnel that the vehicles used to access the dock. It also meant that he couldn't eavesdrop on the order leadership, who primarily restricted themselves to secure areas. Even when they did come into the common areas, they frequently employed privacy screens.

The secure areas also included the section of the facility where the order held their captive. With no access to the prisoner or the order leadership, Shade had spent his time learning what he could from the ordinary members. His favourite targets for eavesdropping were the highly chatty Rhett and Jaime, with whom he had arrived in the first place. Unfortunately, they spent a lot of time with the one member he most tried to avoid.

Kelleigh had pale skin, bright green eyes and an inferno of red hair. By Shade's assessment, she was the greatest danger to him, even compared to the leadership. Her senses were sharper than the others and she had the feel of a sword in its sheath. From what Shade managed to overhear, she was also Melody's first choice for missions that absolutely needed to succeed.

Oddly, she spent the bulk of her recreation time with Rhett and Jaime, who stood out from the others. The vast majority of the order members had the blank-faced seriousness of magical compulsion. Shade had seen countless forms of control over the millennia, from mind-altering spores to vampirism to puppeteering implants. Even those members of the order who showed contention and ambition had a drone-like dedication to the order, Purity and their goals.

Kelleigh also demonstrated this blank-faced dedication around the others, except for Rhett and Jaime. There was a spark of humanity in them that led to the rest of the order

subtly excluding them, leaving them to mostly keep their own company. It was odd, then, that the favoured Kelleigh would likewise spend time with them, her blank, fierce demeanour softening around the pair.

Shade was biding his time until he was able to contact his other bodies to reveal what he had learned. That did not include, unfortunately, his location. His senses had been cut off the moment he had entered the order's transport vessel in Rhett's shadow, first by the vehicle and now by the stronghold.

The exits were extremely secure, so there was no leaving to contact his other bodies. Shade's intangibility did not allow him to pass through large solid objects because of his nature as a living shadow, rather than a ghost-like entity. Even if he could have, he wouldn't have risked it. He suspected that the mountain's protections would have detected him at the very least, blocked him almost certainly and possibly destroyed him. A single body was no great loss and he had three of them with him, but once the order became aware of his presence, he would be hunted down.

Shade had been awaiting a chance to depart on one of the vessels but Melody had ordered a halt to all activity in the wake of the island raid. He had heard about an operation specifically related to Jason and his team, but it was being run out of another facility and Shade had only gleaned fragments of information.

Shade knew that his chance would come when the order made its next big move. Directly after the raid, as part of reasserting her authority, Melody had announced her plan to obtain the materials to set up their own construct factory. Key to this plan was the captive, Gibson Amouz, who held many secrets of the Amouz family and their mining operations. The information they could get from him would allow Melody to put her plan into action.

Since the capture of the prisoner, Melody and her second-in-command, Sendira, had been coming and going from the cells on a regular basis. When Melody finally emerged with a satisfied expression, Shade knew it would soon be time to move.

Clive and Jason had struck a dead end with their project until they had access to an artificer with expertise in cloud flasks. Unfortunately, that level of expertise was almost impossible to find. Otherwise, using one as bait wouldn't have drawn the world's best young adventurers to Greenstone.

"I really think we'll need Emir to tell us who crafted the cloud flask in the first place," Clive said. "It's just that Sophie isn't exactly happy with Cal and Emir right now."

"It's not like any bridges have been burned," Jason said. "Sophie is angry, but not to the point of breaking ties. It's more at Cal than Emir anyway. Humphrey told me that Emir actually tried to help them until Constance told him off. And Sophie remembers that it was Emir who went against the Adventure Society to shelter her when she needed it the most. This is a fight between friends because someone did something kind of crappy, not the advent of enemies."

"Even so, we should put this aside until we find Sophie's mother and deal with whatever fallout comes from it."

"Agreed."

Jason left Clive and went to find Belinda, who was on the roof, practising her aura control. She needed to have it as precise as possible, in case she had a chance to execute her plan.

"Care for a little cooperative training?" he offered.

"Please," she said gratefully.

The fact that Jason's absurd aura strength made him more comparable to a gold-ranker than a silver usually overshadowed the fact that his aura control was just as outrageous. Of the two factors, Jason was more proud of the control, as his strength was just a reflection of the beatings his soul had taken. His aura control was something he had painstakingly worked on and developed. Aura strength might be power, but aura control was skill.

It had started with Farrah laying Jason's foundation back in Greenstone. From there, he had trained with Danielle Geller and studied the techniques of vampiric auras with Craig Vermillion. The Healer Priest, Carlos Quilido, had helped Jason restore his damaged soul after it was besieged by the Builder's star seed. That same battle had given Jason an insight into his own soul that had expanded his aura manipulation horizons, to the point of using power suppression collars as training tools.

Jason had even studied the auras of his familiars, which were even more alien than those of vampires. It was difficult to glean anything from them, operating so differently to the aura of an essence user, but Jason managed to learn from each. Shade's use of aura was nuanced and delicate, with expertise that even Jason's talent would take centuries to replicate. Following Shade's example helped Jason restrain his aura for stealth purposes, although his efforts remained crude next to Shade.

Shade was so ancient that Jason felt not even a little competitive. Once Jason was strong enough to give Shade a vessel whose aura matched Shade's potential, Jason wondered if anything in the cosmos would be able to detect him.

Colin's aura was utterly unrelenting. It was bizarre and hard to get any gains from, but Jason had used the insights he managed to glean to enhance his already superior ability to fend off aura suppression. As for Gordon, that was a special case. Gordon already enhanced Jason's aura strength, as a passive effect while not manifested. That was why, despite Gordon being the most alien of all, Jason found the way the familiar used his aura the easiest to learn from. Studying it improved Jason's aura control regarding suppressing the auras of others.

Jason, as it turned out, had a talent for adventuring. Between hard experience, expert training and no small number of skill books, he had built a skill set that allowed him to stand with guild elites without shame. He might not be a match for Rufus' swordsmanship or Sophie's mobility, but he would pit his aura manipulation, irrespective of strength, against anyone

of his own rank. Even in Rimaros, a land of elites, Estella Warnock was the only silver-ranker who could hold her own, and she had four aura powers.

Jason's team were all silver-rankers with advanced aura senses, so they were fully aware of how absurd Jason's aptitude in this area was. This was why Belinda had been asking Jason to help her with her shape-shifting power. It wasn't something she used a lot, but a crucial part of any shape-shifting power was aura manipulation. There was little point in changing a face when even basic aura senses would see through the deception.

Belinda's power gave her an edge in aura manipulation and also made hiding her aura much easier, making her second only to Jason in stealth amongst the team. Her power was especially good at helping her blend her aura into crowds, making the people around her overlook her presence. This was very similar to a technique Jason developed studying the vampiric aura of his friend Craig, which Belinda had picked up with slightly annoying ease.

Jason found it an interesting experience helping Belinda master the ability. Her power simply gave her the ability to do what he had painstakingly studied and trained to accomplish, giving him a fresh perspective on skill books. In this case, it was a power, rather than a skill book, but he discovered a new empathy for those who complained about others using shortcuts. Jason knew it wasn't that simple, which was why Belinda's power hadn't made her Jason's equal. It would take time and skill to truly master the effect, and he was helping her just as Rufus had once helped him.

Jason was less expert with aura disguises, which was what Belinda wanted to focus on. Vidal, who was currently talking with Sophie, had seen through the cracks in Jason's disguise during an early, ill-advised experiment. Belinda's power once again gave her an edge in this, allowing her to quickly pick up the techniques that Jason was still refining through painstaking practise.

"That's good," Jason said, looking at the two copies of himself sitting in front of him on the roof. The one without a

bushy moustache had an aura that was very close to his own, except for a fatal flaw.

“I can’t match the aura strength,” Belinda said. “It’s pretty detectable, even when I’m restraining my aura, right?”

“No, you’ve done very well,” Jason said. “It’ll hold up to casual scrutiny, but not if someone gets rude and takes a hard poke. Some people will see through it, though, but I’m talking about gold- and diamond-rankers who know my aura well and there’s not much you can do about that.”

“Good thing the plan isn’t to mimic you, then,” Belinda said. “You don’t find it ridiculous that there are gold- and diamond-rankers that familiar with your aura?”

“I accepted ridiculous as my normal a long time ago. We can continue to practise this, but I think you’re ready. If we get the chance—”

“She will,” Shade interrupted, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “Mr Asano, invite Princess Liara to a voice chat.”

COMING IN HOT

A MINING COMPLEX LAY NOT JUST DEEP BENEATH THE SURFACE but even below the sea floor itself. A sprawling network of facilities linked by a tangled web of tunnels contained a process that went from mining rare ores to refining them and finally transporting them to Rimaros and other cities throughout the Sea of Storms.

The submarine docking station was the only part of the complex not buried under the sea floor and had space for several extremely large vessels. Currently, one such vessel was docked, along with five smaller ones. The smaller vessels looked something akin to flattened whales and were the stealthy vehicles used by the Order of Redeeming Light.

Ever since he first entered one of those vehicles, the connection between Shade and his other bodies had been blocked. The vehicles had powerful sense-blocking magic that made communication impossible, as did the Order of Redeeming Light's stronghold, where Shade had been dwelling in the days since the vehicle took him there. With the departure of the vehicles, Shade had the chance to leave the stronghold, once more hidden in the shadow of an order member.

Shade had no way of knowing where the stronghold was, which was also true for most of the order's own members. Part of the reason for the shielding on the vehicles was to prevent the information from being leaked should any of the order be captured and somehow compelled to talk, or even simply eavesdropped upon.

The docking station was a vast, open complex with many support structures to secure it against the weight of water pressing in. Magical architecture normally used magic in place of such measures, but the sheer mass of the sea above warranted additional measures in order to maintain such a large and open space in the depths.

The loading bay of the mining facility could handle multiple large transports being loaded simultaneously, which had paused as the unexpected vessels docked and the order members emerged. The first targets they went for were the silver-rank guards that had been added for security by Cassin Amouz after discovering his son had been taken.

The first thing the guards attempted was to trigger an aura beacon they had been supplied in case of attack, but the order had already anticipated such a move. The first the guards learned of the order's approach was a wave of artificial aura suppression, the inverse of the artificial aura projection of the beacon. This was a function of the stealth vessels, extending the effect of their sense-blocking magic, albeit at a hefty cost.

The suppression effect was energy-hungry and couldn't be maintained for long, but it was long enough. Between the number of facilities in need of protection and the inability to spare too many silver-rankers during a surge, the silver-rank guards were too few in number. When five vessels disgorged Purity-worshipping raiders, they overwhelmed the guards with numbers and shut down the beacon before the suppressive effect was exhausted.

The order moved immediately to attack the startled labourers and supervisors, all of whom were iron- or bronze-rank. They had scattered immediately when the order attacked, fleeing deeper into the complex while the order dealt with the guards. The order had tried to stop them all, but the guards sacrificed themselves valiantly to protect the workers, allowing around half to flee deeper into the mining facility. Most of those managed to escape due to the complex nature of the facility and the fact that aura senses were extremely stifled by the sea floor from which most of the complex had been dug.

In the chaos, Shade slipped from the shadow of the order member he was hiding in and into one of the many shadows around the docking area. There was no shortage of them, cast by strings of glow stones dangling from the high ceiling.

The moment that the aura suppression of the vehicle dropped, he was no longer restrained by their powerful sense-blocking magic, and he was once again connected to his other selves. The memories of his other bodies flooded in, like a long-forgotten experience suddenly and vividly brought back by a nostalgic smell. Shade's other bodies likewise gained the memories he had obtained while hidden in the order's stronghold.

In the submarine dock, Jason stepped out of Shade's body behind a stack of wooden crates twice his height. He restrained his aura so as not to be detected, but the strength of his senses still was enough to take in his surroundings. There were lingering auras of the facility workers in front of the large transport vessel, as well as scattered where they ran before the Order of Redeeming Light cut them down. The only living people in the large dock were a team of four order members, apparently guarding the facility's only means of retreat.

Jason's senses only penetrated a few rooms into the facility before they were blocked. Carved directly from the stone under the sea floor, something about the material seemed to impede magical senses. It wasn't an artificial installation but a natural property of the stone.

"What's blocking my senses?" Jason asked quietly. Shade's power to hide Jason from different senses prevented Jason's voice from being audible, except to Shade himself. Even activating a privacy screen would be sensed by the order members in the dock, let alone if he spoke aloud. Their silver-rank spirit attributes made their senses sharp enough to pick up even a whisper.

“Deep granite,” Shade responded. “It’s a cost-effective means of blocking low- to mid-rank senses, so they likely quarry the stone itself, along with the ores located in this area. It normally wouldn’t block senses as strong as yours, but when it’s metres thick, even you won’t be able to sense more than a room or two away.”

“Will it be enough to stop portals and communication powers?”

“Yes. Likely your mapping power as well, although your aura strength may be able to push all of these abilities further than most.”

“We’ll have to portal everyone into this room and go chasing the order, then, instead of deploying them strategically around the facility.”

“That is the case, yes.”

“You’re briefing Liara?”

“Yes. She is readying portal specialists and teams as I do so, including the special team you requested.”

“She actually had them? I only took a punt and asked because she’d been juggling the Builder infiltrators. There’s really a whole team?”

“Yes. She is assigning them to securing the dock, as the only egress point, be that via portal or transport vessel.”

“I have to admire the long-term thinking, although it’s dangerous letting them just float around.”

“Yet, her efforts will seem to pay off,” Shade said. “Once she heard Miss Belinda’s plan, Lady Liara was willing to play this particular card.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “You spread out through the facility and scout. We won’t be able to communicate except at short ranges, but that’s a lot better than walking around blind. I’m going to head back; you keep one body here for me to jump to. Once I open an actual portal, there’ll be no hiding it from the people on guard here.”

Shade bodies emerged from Jason and vanished into the shadows. Jason stepped into one of them and disappeared.

Baseph Rimaros urged his subordinates to hurry as he ushered them into the safe room, then sealed it behind them. There were a number of such rooms around the facility and he hoped supervisors were getting their people inside. They were designed to survive the facility flooding rather than a raid, but they were strong, secure and had the magic resources to sustain the occupants for days until rescue arrived.

Baseph didn't go in himself; he needed to do his best to make sure that rescue came. He had an aura beacon that could signal his wife, but it wouldn't work in most of the facility. It would only alert her to trouble, not the nature of it, but he trusted her to be careful as well as decisive. He had never expected to use the thing, but now he would need to reach the dock in order to trigger it, which was no safe bet.

There was a good chance that it wouldn't even work, should he make it safely to the dock. One of the panicked personnel who prompted Baseph to order the staff into the safe rooms had told him that the signal beacons of the guards had been somehow disabled. Even so, Baseph needed to try. If no one found out what was happening quickly enough, there was a very real chance that once they did, nothing but corpses would remain.

Under the uncertain assumption that he could signal for help, Baseph would continue to try and help his people. It was his responsibility to protect the facility personnel from the white-clad killers roaming the tunnels, as best he could. His best wasn't great—he had no illusions about that—but he would do what he could.

Baseph had already run into some of the raiders, who spotted and chased him until he escaped following a terror-filled scramble. If not for his comprehensive understanding of the facility's warren-like tunnel system, he would have been

caught and probably killed already. He had whispered a prayer of thanks to the Goddess of Knowledge before continuing on his way, moving swiftly but cautiously onward.

Liara was rapidly marshalling forces, collecting silver-rank teams in one of the Adventure Society's marshalling yards. Unfortunately, she had no access to a gold-ranker who both had a portal ability and had been to the facility. This meant that she would be using silver-rankers exclusively until a gold-ranker could reach the facility the long way.

Two specialised in operating underwater were already en route and would arrive in less than an hour. That would be little comfort to the people already dying from the Purity worshippers' raid, so the silver-rankers being sent immediately were crucial.

As the team assembled, Shade was continuing to brief Liara on what he had discovered while trapped in the enemy stronghold. Liara hadn't waited once she realised what was happening, allowing Shade to fill her in while she organised a response.

"...specific materials, in order to build their own version of the Builder's construct factory. They intend to purge the mining complex's personnel, leaving only enough to load what they need. They chose the timing from information I believe they obtained from their prisoner, Gibson Amouz."

"Speaking of which..." Liara said, looking up to where Cassin Amouz was descending like a missile. He landed hard enough to crack the flagstone under his feet, which immediately started repairing itself. Adventure Society marshalling yards were always built to handle abuse.

Cassin looked at Liara and then at Shade standing next to her.

"You're the one who has seen my son?" he demanded. Liara immediately activated a privacy screen.

“I have not seen your son,” Shade said. “I have been in a location where your son is being held.”

“Where is he?”

“I do not know, I am sorry,” Shade said. “I am confident, however, that he is still alive.”

“Tell me where—”

Cassin stepped menacingly at Shade only for another figure to step out of the shadowy body. It was a small man, draped in blood-red adventuring robes and an impossibly dark cloak. From within the hood, a pair of alien eyes looked out. Cassin was taken aback by his inability to sense any aura from the man standing right in front of him.

“I understand your distress, Lord Amouz,” Jason said. “We don’t know where your son is—yet. The zealots are very careful about giving out information.”

“Put me in a room with one and they’ll talk.”

“No they won’t, sir,” Jason said, “and I think you know that. A plan is in progress to determine the location of their main facility, expose it and rescue your son.”

“And that plan is...?”

“In progress,” Jason said. “And as time is of the essence, we should get to it, yes?”

“I know who you are, Jason Asano. I’ve heard stories and rumours. Are you as good as what I’ve heard implies?”

“Yes.”

Cassin gave a short, sharp nod, then held out a small, ovoid crystal.

“Magic map of the complex. You have a mapping ability?”

Jason took the crystal, which immediately dissolved in his hand.

“I do.”

“Please find my son.”

Jason pushed the hood back to reveal his face.

“I’ll do my best, Lord Amouz. And my best is pretty bloody good.”

Moments later, Liara was explaining the plan to the assembled teams, each of which was made up of guild elites, including the rest of Jason’s team. There was also a handful of portal users.

“Each team will have a map and an assignment,” Liara announced. “Team Scouring Wind will secure the dock while other teams have designated target locations. Seek out and secure base personnel while eliminating any and all opposition. Standing orders to prioritise capture if possible are rescinded for the duration of this mission. Put them down and get the people out safely.”

Liara started assigning target locations on a map of the complex projected from a crystal. Her assistant, Rodney, distributed more maps. He handed out both magical ones like Jason was given, for those with navigation powers, plus projected ones like Liara was using, one per team.

“As you can see,” Liara continued, “the facility is extremely complex. Anyone with navigation power will fare better than those using a projected map, so follow their lead if your team has one. Those teams have been assigned the deepest target locations. Be aware that your magical senses will be significantly impaired. You’ll be relying on your eyes and your ears on this one.”

With a gesture, she expanded the dock area of the map.

“We have one portal user who can open a portal to our target location,” Liara continued. “This is the only location where portals will work. He will open the portal, letting other portal users through, who will immediately open more portals to let our people through. Be aware that there are hostiles who will know the moment the first portal opens, so no dicking around. Move fast and clean the moment the second set of portals open, because you will be coming in hot. My husband is one of the civilians we need to rescue, so if I see so much as a hint of guild rivalry nonsense slowing this operation down, I

will personally execute everyone involved right here in this marshalling yard, is that clear?"

Without waiting for a response, she turned to Jason.

"Go."

WE ARE FIGHTING MONSTERS

JASON RETURNED TO THE SUBMARINE DOCK, AGAIN EMERGING from Shade's body, behind the high stack of crates. He immediately strode out from behind the stack, the opposite of hiding as his aura flooded out. Its oppressive presence masked the appearance of the portal that rose behind him, still hidden by the crates. Four Purity worshippers and twice that number of the pure converted immediately turned to look as he stepped out boldly to march in their direction.

The enemy didn't immediately rush to the attack, looking around cautiously for further enemies. Jason didn't rush either as he strode across the dock, urging his cloak to flutter around him, despite the lack of breeze. He drew his sword, the white sigil on the black blade turning blood red.

- You have used conjuration ability [Blade of Doom] to conjure [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation].
- Weapon [Hegemon's Will] has prevented the conjuration, gaining all properties of the conjured weapon.

- [Hegemon's Will] has gained the unholy, curse, disease and poison types.
- Attacks made with [Hegemon's Will] now refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects

refreshed by [Hegemon's Will] require more healing than normal to negate.

- Attacks made with [Hegemon's Will] now inflict [Vulnerable], [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit].

“Are you sure you couldn't find a way to be more dramatic, Mr Asano?”

“Not really the time, Shade.”

“Perhaps a smoke bomb?”

“You see the people coming to attack me, right?”

“A background choir, chanting your name in slow, ominous tones?”

“You're hardly in a place to criticise anyone for—”

Jason didn't finish his sentence as he and the enemy reached each other. Jason's slow stride became rapid, darting movements as his cloak drifted around him, obscuring his form. He moved straight into the enemies' midst, surprising them as his blade flickered at the end of a shadow arm that moved in ways a flesh and bone arm could not. With more length and flexibility than his actual arms, the shadowy limb and the weapon it held were more like a sword-whip. They moved with speed and unpredictability but inflicted only shallow cuts.

Jason kicked one essence user into the water as he danced through the enemy, their clustered formation making it hard to pin down his elusive movements, but they quickly adapted. Some backed off, giving room to the others and themselves the chance to cast cleansing spells. They were well aware of who they were fighting and what he could do.

Jason didn't try too hard to evade their attempts to enclose him and he was soon encircled. He outstripped the enemies, especially the pure converted, but they swiftly recovered from the surprise of his tactics. What made them a surprise was their unsoundness, proven as he began struggling with their

numbers in short order. A bolt of light punched through his cloak to leave a blackened scorch on his armour, while a converted's flame-wreathed sword bit into the flesh of his arm.

Just as it seemed they were dealing with an extremely ill-advised ambush, one of the order members who had backed off felt something through the aura Jason had used to blanket the dock. Five portals opening near-simultaneously was hard to miss, even while distracted by a surprise attack and a domineering aura.

She cried out to the others, but it was too late. A figure launched from the top of the nearby crates, propelled forward by magic. Jason used his shadowy cloak to vanish as Humphrey landed in his spot, sending out a shockwave that staggered his enemies. It only took them a moment to recover, but Humphrey used that same moment to swing his enormous sword.

Unstoppable Force was the most powerful single attack in Humphrey's arsenal. It was also one that no one looked down on just for being a common ability from a common essence. Not only did it inflict massive amounts of damage, but a good part of that damage was resonating-force and disruptive-force, making it effective against any form of defensive barrier. It also kept going, affecting anyone that could be hit with a single swing.

Thanks to the people crowding Jason, who had vanished to make room for Humphrey, there were a half-dozen enemies within reach of his massive dragon sword. He swung it in a full circle, as much a club as a sword. Every impact triggered the silver-rank effect of the attack: a blast of concussive force that exploded out of the enemies' backs to slam into the others behind them, blasting them all away.

Two were sent flying off the dock and into the water. The pure converted went charging at Humphrey while the essence users called for them to stop, but it was too late. Humphrey's very common power made it easy to recognise, so the essence users knew that its bronze-rank effect was to reduce the cooldown for each enemy hit. Landing it on a half dozen

meant that as soon as the converted were back in reach, Humphrey swung again.

Even Humphrey's most powerful attack, empowered further by his own life force and a boosting spell from Neil, was not enough to take down silver-rankers. Humphrey's low-rank days of one-shotting everything in his path were well behind him. His impact at silver rank, though, was possibly even greater because anyone of that level was used to feeling a certain level of invincibility.

The massive life force within a silver-ranker made them extremely hard to kill, so the immense amount of damage Humphrey inflicted in moments was as much a mental shock as a physical one. This was much more true of the essence users than the converted, who weren't entirely drone-like but whose numbed mindsets lacked the imagination to be truly startled. Fortunately, they were the lesser threat.

Humphrey had gone off like a bomb, putting the enemy on the back foot—or just their back—as additional adventurers came tearing out from behind the crates where the portals had been opened. As the Order of Redeemed Light had done to the dock guards just minutes earlier, their sentries were overwhelmed by numbers.

Baseph gave up on reaching the docks to activate his beacon and signal his wife. He might know the complex far better than the invaders, but their sheer numbers made the attempt too much of a risk. He counted multiple teams of essence users, as well as other people who were something else entirely. They were ostensibly people, but their auras felt empty, as if they'd been hollowed out.

Baseph's aura was quite strong, being in the upper reaches of silver rank. He would still need several years to catch his wife's gold rank, using monster cores as, even with their privileged station, the avalanche of cores required was not easy to come by.

His aura control was also solid, not just as required from a member of high society but also because of his wife. She was a stealth specialist with extensive aura senses and had trouble fully relaxing around sloppy auras. She had made sure that his control would rival most adventurers.

The result was that between his aura expertise and the sense-suppressing walls, Baseph remained uncaught, despite a few close calls. Once he realised that attempting to reach the dock was futile, he moved on to the next point of his agenda. Before he did, he stopped in a hidden spot to steel himself. It was a drastic step for many reasons.

Baseph had never killed anyone. He was an administrator who had spent his life running supply networks and high-value mining facilities. But if he initiated the complex's final defence systems, people were going to die. Hopefully, the invaders, but the odds were high that not all the surviving workers had made it to the safe rooms. Even so, he saw little alternative. With no signal getting out, it would be many hours—if not days, during a monster surge—before anyone realised something was wrong at the facility. That was more than enough time for the invaders to find their way into the safe rooms.

Baseph balled his hands into fists and then relaxed them over and over, his eyes clenched shut. Finally, he opened his eyes and set out.

The leader of the mining complex rescue expedition was Korinne Pescos. Jason had worked with her team once before, although their relationship was not a good one. Jason, along with Vesper and Zara Rimaros, had been attached to an expedition with Korinne's team at a time when Jason hadn't been in a good place. His penchant for going off alone, his savagery and his dangerous, enigmatic behaviour had not enamoured him to her or her team.

As for Jason, the presence of Korinne and her team reminded Jason of Princess Vesper and Jeni Kavaloa, the gold-ranker who had led that expedition. Kavaloa hadn't been any happier with Jason than Korinne, but they had come to at least a mutual respect and Jason had quite liked her. She had been dumped with a scheming princess and a volatile head-case in Jason when all she wanted to do was her job.

Vesper and Jeni had died together, defending Rimaros from the Builder's flying city. Sacrificing themselves to buy time for the weapon that brought the city down, they were lauded as heroes.

Jason's feelings about heroic sacrifice were laced with confusion and guilt. He had sacrificed his own life more than once, sometimes knowing he would come back and other times not. He wondered, not for the first time, what made him deserving of such grace, over people who died for others in the full knowledge that they wouldn't come back. He always came up with the same answer—nothing, which left him unsettled.

Jason considered these feelings as he watched Korinne issue directions. It was yet another thing he would have to work through with Arabelle, he reflected, although he was increasingly ill-at-ease with occupying so much of her time. There was more than enough trauma going around, and the Church of the Healer kept her extremely busy.

“Why does she get to be in charge?” Neil whispered, still listening to Korinne. They were far from the only group talking quietly amongst themselves as Korinne issued directives, reiterating the assignments of the various teams. Silver-rankers were more than capable of multi-tasking their attention, so they didn't miss anything.

“No one would even know about this without us, let alone respond to it.”

“You need the hammer to push in the nail,” Humphrey said. “That doesn't mean you let the hammer decide where the nail goes.”

“What does that mean?” Neil asked.

“It means that in an expedition,” Humphrey said, “everyone has their role. You need to trust the leader, especially in a hastily assembled expedition, and all these people know about us is what they know about Jason. Are they going to trust him over one of their own that they have known and respected for years?”

Neil looked over at Jason, who looked back and shrugged. He knew that their impression was probably worse than what Neil was imagining.

“Fair enough,” Neil acknowledged, turning his full attention back to Korinne.

“...and Team Scouring Wind will maintain control of the dock,” she continued. “As communication powers will not work deeper in the facility, we will be using scouting and stealth specialists as messengers and lookouts to keep in contact. This includes familiars from various teams to which you’ve already been introduced. We just overran the enemy here and I don’t want the same happening to any of our teams.”

“I’d love a look in those vessels the Order of Redeeming Light use,” Clive said, eyeing off the vehicles.

“So would every artificer in this room,” Humphrey said. “Priorities.”

“I’ll see if I can steal you one,” Belinda said.

“No, you won’t,” Humphrey told her firmly.

“Oh, yeah, absolutely not,” she said unconvincingly, nodding at Clive behind Humphrey’s back.

The teams only lingered in the dock for the few minutes it took to assess their environment and send out the first scouts, including Sophie. Korinne took the time to quickly reiterate Liara’s briefing before the scouts came back and the teams set out. Jason’s team had Jason’s map ability to navigate, along with Jason’s powerful senses and plenty of scouting options in

Jason, Sophie and Shade. Accordingly, they were assigned to the locations deepest within the complex.

Shade had been scouting the facility since Jason released most of his bodies before the expedition even arrived. They were already reporting back to various teams regarding enemy locations and disposition of the facility personnel. This helped Jason's team detour into the path of a group of pure converted, which they made short work of. The team paused for a moment to look over the people they had killed.

"I think these poor bastards may be more victims of Purity and his maniac followers than anyone," Belinda said, then looked warily at Sophie, as Jason and Humphrey did the same.

"I'm fine," she said. Jason's aura senses let him know she was lying, as did Humphrey and Belinda's intimate knowledge of her, as lover and friend respectively.

Anger crossed Humphrey's face and Jason mirrored his feelings. Their anger hadn't been at Purity, in that moment, but at Callum Morse. Cal had arrived at the marshalling yard as the teams assembled and were about to depart when he dropped a bomb on the team. Of all the times to tell them that Sophie's mother was leading the Order of Redeeming Light, when they were about to fight them under orders to take no prisoners, was about as bad a choice as he could have made. Sophie had put on a stoic face, showing no reaction at all, but she couldn't hide her turmoil from Jason, Belinda and Humphrey.

While they looked with concern to Sophie, Neil and Clive were fixated on the pure converted, transformed by the purified clockwork cores.

"Builder, Purity," Clive muttered bitterly. "They keep doing these things to people. When do we go back to fighting monsters?"

"We *are* fighting monsters," Neil told him. "And we're going to kill them all."

JUST SOME ADMINISTRATOR

UNSURPRISINGLY, THE PURITY WORSHIPPERS HAD NO SHORTAGE of powers that could cleanse Jason's afflictions. Those afflictions were unusually tenacious and inflicted harm as they were removed, but it was not an insurmountable task. This was especially true given that the Order of Redeeming Light seemed to have an excellent grasp of his capabilities. Jason considered this information to have most likely come from the Builder when he made a deal to have him assassinated.

These factors made sneaking around to drop afflictions on worshippers in hit-and-run strikes a losing proposition. When this swiftly became evident, Jason focused on dropping afflictions on them in hit-and-run strikes anyway. It primed them for elusive and evasive attacks, positioning themselves to watch every shadow. This took the enemy out of position for reacting to a more conventional attack, which was exactly what they faced when Humphrey came barrelling out of a tunnel, his companions close behind.

Unexpected attacks from entire teams were a rarity beyond the low-ranks. Unless a team was specialised in stealth and ambush tactics, the way Liara's had been, the ability to sense enemies at significant distances meant that sneak attacks usually came from individuals. The sense suppressing stone that surrounded them changed that dynamic, allowing for groups to bumble into one another. Jason's senses ameliorated that for his team, however, giving them just enough advanced warning to utilise ambush tactics.

Switching from warding off Jason's elusive attacks to resisting Humphrey's onslaught required a completely different approach. Humphrey's aggressive physicality didn't allow them the chance to reorganise; he smashed into the enemy and disrupted their formation. The team employed a strategy they had used commonly since iron rank. Putting a heavy focus on Humphrey, they loaded him with powerful buffs, protections and prioritised shields and healing to both maximise his threat and shield him from enemy retaliation.

The rest of the team mixed up disrupting the enemy to maintain the initiative, like Sophie, or pouring on the damage, like Clive. The team had the advantage of Jason's senses and Shade's scouting giving them the chance to ambush, so Clive's powerful staff and rod were already ritual-enhanced and he came in blasting.

Unlike in the open docks, the tunnels had no room for Humphrey's massive dragon sword and he instead used his other conjured weapon. The Razor Wing Sword was also heavily stylised as a wing, but this was more like the wing of a gold and silver bird. The back edge of the one-handed blade was a sawtooth of glossy metal feathers.

The feathers were not just for show, flinging themselves off the sword to dance around Humphrey in a storm of rainbow razors. They joined the crystals, already floating around him, that restored his mana and intercepted magical projectiles. As the feather could intercept physical projectiles, it was an effective defence against ranged attacks, although that was less of an issue in the restricted space of the tunnels.

The Razor Wing sword was smaller and lighter than its dragon wing counterpart. This made it more useful in the enclosed tunnels and allowed Humphrey to fight with greater finesse. With the heftier sword, a large part of Humphrey's fighting style was managing the weapon's weight, leveraging it to maximise his formidable strength. It took a deceptive amount of skill, despite the results seeming crude and brutish. With the smaller sword, he still used his strength and resilience to great effect, but he also got to show off a lifetime of training in a much more recognisable fashion.

As a general rule, the higher an adventurer went in rank, the more they valued open space for combat. Mobility became greater, powers increasingly covered wider areas and even the base physicality of a silver- or gold-ranker would swiftly demolish most environments. Aside from those who thrived in dark, constricted environments like assassination specialists or Jason, most adventurers were uncomfortable when they couldn't move freely. That might mean being outside or smashing through barriers, but the naturally magical stone the tunnels were dug from made no such allowances.

This was where the versatility of Jason's team was able to shine. On the Builder island, they had been working with Team Work Saw, who had regularly proven more effective with their efficient, orthodox tactics and strategy. In the tight tunnels, the situation would have been reversed if they had been here to see, but they had not been chosen for the hastily issued contract. Liara had known full well what kind of teams would be most useful.

Every team member present made an impact, from Neil's shields to Clive's staff blasts to Stash as a tentacled ceiling monster. Sophie danced through the chaos, as free as if she were dancing at a festival, Humphrey's razor feathers and Clive's attacks passing her by as if choreographed. Jason, now forgotten as a threat, was free to dose up the essence users while Humphrey and Clive focused on the converted.

Stash's monster form was a flat, fleshy blob that clung to the ceiling like slime. It was dominated by a circular maw ringed with multiple rows of shark teeth, and from inside the mouth extended three tentacles. The tentacles yanked converted into the maw to be chewed on and then spat back out before moving on to another victim.

The fight was a comfortable win for Team Biscuit, wrapping up as Jason's execute spell dissolved the last Purity worshipper into rainbow smoke. As the team used either Jason or Neil's looting powers to harvest the bodies, Jason looked up at Stash, still adhered to the ceiling.

"I can't tell if that form is awesome or disgusting," he told the familiar, who responded with a stench that almost rivalled

the noxiousness of rainbow smoke.

“Okay, now I can tell,” Jason said in a choked voice as he held his nose.

“Let’s not tarry,” Humphrey said, holding the crystal projection map in front of him. Jason could allow others to look at his map, but it would be much the same as the projection to the others. Only Jason himself gained a more intimate understanding of the layout from his ability.

“We still have a long way to go,” Humphrey added, “and then back again with anyone we can rescue. We won’t be able to hand off anyone we find too deep in the complex.”

They had already discovered one safe room full of people, along with a group of pure converted attempting to break in. They had cleared the enemy and the civilians had opened the door from the inside. The team passed them off to another team, one specifically tasked with escorting evacuees.

That team had been guided by Vidal Ladiv, whom Jason and the others had been surprised to see attached to the expedition. The adventurer-bureaucrat didn’t have a map power but had visited the facility numerous times in his years working with the civic authorities of Rimaros. This made him the only member of the expedition with personal experience of navigating the complex. As he had recently reached silver rank, he just scraped in the qualification to participate.

“I still can’t get my head around this map,” Neil said, peering at the three-dimensional projection Humphrey had out. “It looks like a tangled ball of strings and rocks.”

“We’re here,” Clive said, pointing somewhere in the middle, then at the bottom. “And we’re heading here.”

“I’m a little worried about any people we find deep down,” Sophie said. “It’ll be hard to protect people all the way up if we get in a fight in these tunnels.”

“That’s why we have plan B,” Jason said.

“I don’t like plan B.”

“That’s why it’s not plan A,” Jason told her.

“My concern is what Lord Amouz warned us about,” Neil said. “If that happens mid-rescue, it’ll be a huge mess.”

“He said it most likely wouldn’t,” Humphrey said.

“Yeah, and nothing ever goes wrong for us,” Neil shot back. “The moment he said that, I knew it was going to happen. Tempting your own fate is one thing, but that guy tempting ours. That shouldn’t count.”

“Humphrey’s right,” Clive said. “It would take one of the senior staff to not only avoid the safe rooms but also be convinced that no rescue is incoming and then successfully navigate to multiple locations within a facility swarming with enemies, all without being caught. If anyone even made the attempt, they’d be dead. What kind of administrator both would and could manage that, even a silver-rank one?”

Princess Liara’s aura had the strength and expert control to hide her emotions from Jason, but he’d been watching her body language as Cassin Amouz had explained the potential for defensive sabotage by the facility staff. Her reaction had been extremely subtle but he noticed it. Jason was aware that Liara’s marriage was a political one, but he had a hard time imagining her marrying anyone ordinary, even if he was a miner. If she still showed this level of concern after decades of marriage, he wasn’t just some administrator.

“What Humphrey’s right about,” he said, “is that we need to get moving.”

The infrastructure nodes placed throughout the complex were all large chambers filled with complex artifice. Some were overtly magical, like the wall panel with a dozen holes from which various coloured crystals jutted. Others looked more like industrial machinery—steel monstrosities radiating heat and steam that left the room sweltering.

In one such room, Baseph Rimaros stood in front of a large metal box. Aside from a flat, narrow section, the top of the box was angled at forty-five degrees, with ridges to hold a mosaic

of square, ceramic panels in place. The sequence of the tiles governed the systems controlled through the node room, each tile bearing a complex sigil that glowed with green luminescence. The colour reflected the status of the various systems, all of which were operating within ideal ranges. Normally, Baseph would have been happy that his facility was operating optimally, but now he would be sabotaging it himself.

He took a crystal recording projector from his satchel-style dimensional bag and set it on the flat, narrow section of the box. A projection flickered to life over the projector after he took out a recording crystal and slotted it in. The projection depicted a sequence of tiles similar to the one on the panel in front of him, and as the projection played, the tiles started to shift. First pausing the projection, Baseph began rearranging the tiles.

As he continued arranging the tiles, Baseph repeatedly referenced the projection, playing it forward and winding it back through various displayed sequences. As he did, the sigils on the tiles changed colour, one by one. Slowly, as he moved through one sequence after another, the luminescence on the tiles shifted through orange and into red. After a lengthy set of tiles sequences, the last tiles finally turned red, only for every tile to suddenly go dim at once.

“Great,” Baseph muttered to himself. “What idiot insisted on installing additional safety cut-outs?”

He pulled a pry-bar from his satchel and moved around to the side of the box.

“Oh, that’s right, Baseph; it was you. Good job.”

He worked to jam the sharp edge of the pry-bar between two panels on the side of the box.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t add so much time that everyone dies because it takes too long to sabotage your own damn mine.”

The panel came off and he shoved the bar back into his bag, pulling out a hammer and chisel instead, along with a glow stone. He crouched down to peer inside the box and

pushed in the glow stone, which floated in the air to illuminate the interior. Inside the box was a series of vertical rods, engraved with runes. He knew the rods would normally be glowing, but a ceramic panel at the back was the only thing lit up, the sigil on it glowing a harsh red.

Getting down on all fours, Baseph took the hammer and chisel and shuffled as far as he could into the box, the hole being too narrow for his shoulders. The ceramic panel was hard to reach, having been designed as such deliberately to prevent exactly the kind of tampering Baseph was attempting.

“That’s it,” he muttered. “From now on, I’m slacking off on the job.”

The scout for Melody’s team came back from where she had been ranging ahead.

“I found another safe room,” she reported.

Melody pulled out a crystal projector and slotted in a crystal. Gibson Amouz had maps of every major complex in his family’s holdings, but only one map of each. The Order of Redeeming Light’s stronghold lacked the facilities to replicate projection crystals and the risk in time wasted and potential exposure had prompted Melody to reject the idea of getting them replicated in one of the Sea of Storms’ cities.

As there was only one map, Melody had personally taken charge of the team using it. While the other teams went largely after the bulk-stored goods in the upper reaches of the complex, closer to the dock, certain key materials were kept in more secure vaults. Accessing those vaults required either an expert who could crack them, which Melody didn’t have, or finding the people who could open them. These were all upper-level mine officials.

As people from the dock had managed to escape and alert the facility, the key staff would be in safe rooms by now, most likely in the administrative sections in the middle of the complex. The safe rooms were also difficult to access, but not

so much as the vaults themselves. It would take longer than Melody wanted, but it was time she could afford since they had managed to prevent the guards from signalling for help. Even if an expected transport arrived late, there would be plenty of time before a real investigation took place.

Melody checked their location on the map, looking for the safe room the scout had found.

“We’re a little way out from the main administrative centre,” she said, “but there’s still a chance someone we can use is in there. Let’s check it.”

FAMILY ISSUES

CLIVE TOSSED A PINCH OF POWDERED LESSER MONSTER CORE against the wall, briefly causing runes to light up as the powder fell on them.

“I was right,” he said. “There are hidden enchantments placed at regular intervals along all these tunnels.”

“What do they do?” Humphrey asked.

“More precisely, what do they do to us?” Neil asked.

“Nothing, at the moment,” Clive said. “These enchantments are completely inactive, which is why our magic senses didn’t notice them. I think they’re part of the safety measures for the facility.”

“Meaning that if this place does get sabotaged,” Neil said, “whatever these enchantments are, they become active.”

“Most likely,” Clive said. “Should I try to figure out what they do?”

“That would be prudent,” Humphrey said, “but we lack the time for prudence. We keep going.”

Baseph whacked his hammer into the metal plate set into the wall. He repeated the action over and over until the glowing sigil engraved into it dimmed. This caused the orange sigils glowing at various points around the room to turn red. Then

despite having been carved out of solid, magical rock, the room started to very gently vibrate.

“Two nodes down,” he muttered, but his expression held more concern than satisfaction. He had no illusions of the vibration going unnoticed. If the invaders had any idea of what they were doing, and he had to imagine they did, then they would probably be actively searching for him now.

Melody paused, frowning as she tilted her head.

“Melody?” Sendira asked as the rest of the group paused as well.

Melody didn't have any of the pure converted with them, keeping a lean, sharp team of five, including herself. Her second-in-command, Sendira, was the person she trusted the most, which was as much about clarity of purpose as loyalty. Sendira was not the most imaginative subordinate, but she could be relied on to execute orders faithfully, with a surplus of dedication and a deficit of ambition. Every member of the Order of Redeeming Light was loyal to Purity, but not necessarily to Melody.

The third member of the team, Kelleigh, was the most skilled of all Melody's forces, with the possible exception of Melody herself. Even that difference was potentially due to her being in the low range of silver, where Melody was closing in on gold. Like Sendira, Kelleigh was not ambitious, but she demonstrated the occasional independent streak. This placed the ever-reliable Sendira as Melody's second, even if she wasn't quite up to Kelleigh and Melody's level.

The last members of the group definitely weren't up to Kelleigh's level. Rhett and Jaime were a pair that Melody kept close because they demonstrated similar independence of thought to Kelleigh, but to a much greater degree.

Melody was fully aware that the flames of redemption that all members of the order went through frequently engendered a lack of imagination. It wasn't close to the drone-like

behaviour of the pure converted who had resisted the conversion process, but there was a distinct trend towards linear thinking, as exemplified by Sendira. While Melody valued loyalty, she also understood that the ability to think laterally was often more valuable than a strong sword arm.

This was the reason she kept Rhett and Jaime close. They were, without question, the most independent thinkers within all the order's forces. At that moment, they were thinking about how much they didn't like being under many tons of rock that were, in turn, under many tons of water. Unfortunately, their suggestion about how voluntary participation would be was not something Melody had been receptive to.

Melody dropped to one knee, placing a hand on the smooth, polished granite of the tunnel floor.

"This is deep granite," she said. "This entire complex has been dug right through it."

Sendira also crouched to touch the floor and the others did the same. The silver-rank sensitivity of their touch picked up the incredibly faint vibrations.

"What is that?" Sendira asked.

"Deep granite has a resonating property," Kelleigh said. "It is sometimes used in the construction of resonating-force siege weapons for exactly that reason."

"Who uses siege weapons when there are essence users?" Sendira asked.

"Not everywhere is Rimaros," Rhett said. "Most places, silver-rankers are the elites and gold-rankers are too special to waste on knocking down walls."

"We had a line of wine jars made from deep granite," Jaime recollected. "Expensive stuff, but perfect for certain kinds of wine."

"Oh, do you remember tremblevine wine?" Rhett asked reverentially.

“I really thought it would sell better,” Jaime said. “It was so good.”

“I still think it was the name. It sounds kind of gimmicky and cheap.”

“Yeah, we lost a packet on that deal. Do you think we could get some of that wine here?”

“Not here, here,” Rhett told him. “We’re in a wet tomb, remember?”

Melody cleared her throat and the two looked around guiltily.

“What do you think these vibrations are?” Sendira asked Melody while glaring at Rhett and Jaime.

“I’m not sure,” Melody said. “It seems to be affecting a wide area.”

“The vibrations could well be resonating through the stone across large portions of the complex, if not the entire facility,” Kelleigh said. “It might be possible for me to track them to the source.”

“Is that necessary?” Sendira asked. “Perhaps we would be better served by staying on task and avoiding further delays.”

“No,” Melody said. “Whatever this is, the lordling Amouz kept it from us, likely hoping it would catch us out and get us killed.”

“While getting tortured,” Jaime said. “You have to respect that.”

“No, you don’t,” Sendira said with a glower. “We should have put him through the flames of redemption and made him one of us. Then he would hide nothing from us.”

“He’d share everything, sure,” Rhett said. “Weeks from now, once he recovered from the flames. Maybe even months. How long did you take to wake back up, Sendira?”

“Almost three months,” she acknowledged.

“We don’t have that time to wait,” Melody said. “We need to be already building up a construct army by the time the next

war starts. The Adventure Society either knows what we are doing or soon will. Once the monster surge is no longer occupying the bulk of their resources, they will seek us out with rigour.”

“Unfortunately, that left us with less than effective methods of questioning,” Kelleigh said.

“I’m just going to come out and say it,” Jaime said. “I don’t think torture’s great. We worship Purity, not Pain. I know that Caitlyn and her group think that pain purifies the soul, but I think they just like hurting people.”

“And being hurt, I think,” Rhett added. “I’ve heard some sounds coming out of their dormitory that I’m not sure how I feel about.”

“Sometimes suffering is necessary,” Kelleigh said. “Both to be endured and inflicted. There is no Purity in enjoying it either way, yet Caitlyn does both.”

“It is not for you to question other cell leaders,” Melody said as she stood up. “It seems that our captive has endured out under Caitlyn’s ministrations better than we thought. Kelleigh, track these vibrations to the source. I want to know what we’re dealing with.”

“What did I tell you?” Neil asked as Team Biscuit all held their hands to the floor.

“Any way to trace the source?” Humphrey asked Clive. “The staff probably don’t realise that rescue is here.”

“I think I have a ritual in a book that can trace vibrations to the origin point,” Clive said.

“That’s not what we need,” Sophie said. “We have to find whoever it is before they finish the job and all this gets a lot harder.”

“Forget harder,” Neil said. “We’ll be the ones who need rescuing.”

“What have you got, Shade?” Jason asked.

“I am not in regular communication with my other bodies,” Shade said, “but they have been searching for any facility personnel, including senior staff. If one of my selves finds the saboteur, they will inform him that evacuation is in progress. As for tracking the saboteur, perhaps if Mr Standish can determine what has been done already, he can anticipate what will be done next.”

“I think you may be overestimating my ability to determine what’s going on from maybe one room of damaged artifice infrastructure,” Clive said. The rest of the team shook their heads.

“No, I don’t think we are,” Neil said.

“We have a plan, then,” Humphrey said. “The ritual please, Clive.”

Clive called up a circle of floating runes and the small aperture to his storage space appeared. After a quick rummage, he pulled out a book.

“Lindy, can you...” He trailed off as he glanced at her and remembered, then started flicking through his book.

“What?” Belinda asked.

Sophie tapped a finger to her top lip and Belinda’s eyes went wide. Her moustache shrank into her face and vanished.

Baseph turned the heavy wheel valve until it wouldn’t turn any more. He kept exerting his silver-rank strength anyway, but instead of turning more, the wheel broke loose from the shaft as a secondary seal locked heavily into place. With a growl, he tossed the wheel aside and pulled a sledgehammer from his bag. The heavy head was made not of metal but magical stone, while the handle was made of the difficult-to-cultivate colos wood. Very few materials were able to endure rough treatment at the hands of a high-ranker. The materials of the simple

hammer made it more valuable than most expertly crafted bronze-rank weapons.

Baseph hammered on the pipe over and over, its resilience to even silver-rank strength remarkably formidable. Baseph urged himself on, knowing the gong-like ringing would draw any nearby raiders straight to him.

Panting with exertion, Baseph staggered out of the infrastructure node room. He was moving to slink into a shadow when it stepped away from the wall and took the shape of a person. He turned to run, only to find the figure appearing in front of him again.

“Baseph Rimaros, spouse of Princess Liara Rimaros, I presume. My name is Shade. In case it in any way entices you to be less inclined to flee, I am an acquaintance of your wife.”

Baseph looked warily at the dark figure.

“I don’t recall my wife being friends with any strange shadow men.”

“With respect, Mr Rimaros, I am not responsible for the level of attentiveness you demonstrate in the performance of your husbandly duties.”

“Excuse me?”

“I am not here to assist you with your family issues, Mr Rimaros, but to prevent you from sabotaging this facility. As we speak, a rescue operation is taking place to eliminate the invaders and rescue the workers of this facility. If you complete your sabotage efforts, this operation will be considerably impeded.”

Baseph turned to look back at the doorway he had just emerged from, then back to Shade.

“Oh,” he said, and the tunnel started to tremble.

Jason and Sophie were both away from the team, separately scouting ahead, when they heard water rushing on them like an indoor tsunami. Even so, their silver-rank reflexes gave them each time to spring into action. Sophie reacted with unsurprisingly alacrity, moving faster than the wall of water as she dashed down the tunnel. Jason pulled out one of the items he'd purchased to help him deal with underwater environments: a garish orange belt he was still hastily attempting to buckle around himself when the water hit.

Sophie managed to dash back to the team, who had likewise heard the water and were making what preparations they could. Humphrey jammed his sword into the stone floor, burying half the blade despite the stone's resilience. He then gripped the hilt tightly and braced himself. Neil gripped Humphrey tightly and also braced himself. Sophie crashed into Clive, not slowing down as she slung him over her shoulder and kept moving. Belinda looked between her team members, then at the approaching water as it slammed into her.

After what felt like endless, wild tumbling, Jason slammed into something that yielded enough to not hurt while somehow still being very firm. He found himself face-down in knee-deep water and pushed himself onto all fours. He pushed a hand against the barrier and looked at it blearily. It was a glowing magical wall, on the other side of which was water deeper than he was tall.

He groaned as he pushed himself onto his knees and looked around. He was in a tunnel, the other end likewise sealed by a magic barrier. He was also not alone. A woman with dark skin, familiar features and starkly white hair was somehow as dry and pristine as he was wet and bedraggled. She looked down at him from where she was standing on the surface of the water. He got to his feet, using his cloak to

reduce his weight and step onto the surface of the water as well.

“I don’t suppose...” he began, stopping as she drew her sword, cold hostility in her eyes.

“I suppose not,” he said, drawing his own blade. He had lost the extra belt he had tried to put on before the water caught him, but his normal belt had held just fine. The pair looked at each other for a long moment before they clashed, dashing across the water to meet blades. Jason immediately recognised that she was using his fighting style, the Way of the Reaper. He also recognised that she was better at it.

The Way of the Reaper was a highly versatile style, with Jason and Sophie both using it in very different ways. Sophie used its adaptiveness in domineering fashion, shifting her approach moment to moment to apply relentless oppression. Jason was more deceptive and elusive, unpredictable enough that he seemed almost ephemeral. Jason’s opponent fell somewhere in the middle, adaptive and aggressive but also tricky to pin down. After a rapid exchange of blows, they separated, each watching the other with caution.

“You fight a lot like I do,” she observed.

“Your daughter said the same thing the first time we met,” Jason told her. “I’ve got to find a better way to meet women.”

A POWER THAT YOU'VE OVERLOOKED

JASON AND MELODY FACED ONE ANOTHER IN THE MAGICALLY sealed section of tunnel, both standing lightly on the water.

“You know, then,” she said.

“There’s a guy who’s pretty keen to catch you up.”

“You’re helping someone catch your friend’s mother?”

“Nah, we told him to stick it up his quoit. We’ll try and bring you in for our own reasons. Alive, even though we were told to gank you.”

“That’s your general way of doing things, from what I understand.”

“Pretty much. I don’t suppose you can let me know what the Builder told you about me?”

“The Builder’s attitude to you has been extremely erratic, from what I’ve seen. Sometimes it came across as a burning obsession to see you dead, while at others a ruse.”

“A ruse?”

“We had semi-regular contact with the Builder’s cult. I know for certain that the Builder was at least partially using his seeming obsession as a mask when his real intentions were for the diamond-ranker you’re connected to. He wanted her to waste her single chance to intervene, which is why the Sea of Storms had three of the Builder’s fortress cities. But I’ve also seen indications that his obsession was very real, as if the Builder himself was of two minds on you.”

“Yeah, he’s always been a bit all over the shop,” Jason said. “I’m not sure I ever got a straight answer on why, exactly. A friend—and she’d know—told me that great astral beings have their behaviour affected by the vessels they’re using. It’s not just a straight-up puppet show. I don’t think going from mortal to the omnipotent sky wizard of building model kits left him as the most stable of blokes, either, but I can’t help but think there’s something I’m missing.”

“Do you have any concept of how arrogant you sound?” Melody asked. “Why would a great astral being be comprehensible to... wait, did you say he used to be mortal?”

“Yep. The guy who had his job first got caught playing silly buggers with a couple of worlds—guess which ones—and they gave him the boot.”

“That seems like an absurd story.”

“Lady, you’ve had me checked out. I am an absurd story.”

“Indeed you are. Your capability with the Way of the Reaper is impressive for someone who only learned it a few years ago. Skill books?”

“Yeah.”

“Even so, you’ve certainly made it your own.”

“I’ve had the odd scrap here and there,” Jason said. “Plenty of chances to practise. No match for an old hand like you, but your daughter might give you a run for your money. You’ve got the experience, but she’s crazy talented. Rufus Remore quietly told me she’s one of the best he’s ever seen. And that means something, if you know the name.”

“I do. And I would like to thank you for what you’ve done for my daughter.”

“You’re welcome, I suppose. I’m not sure that means much coming from a deadbeat mother, though.”

Melody’s superior expression turned angry. “You have no idea what I’ve sacrificed for that girl!”

“I know what I’ve sacrificed,” Jason said, unfazed by Melody’s outburst.

“She’d have died a child if not for me.”

“Oh, you stopped your child from dying. Congratulations on the absolute minimum of parental responsibility.”

Melody flashed across the water, sword darting at Jason. There was another dancing clash of blades before they again separated, this time Jason coming out the better. He knew that she was either genuinely angry or very good at selling a story. Her aura told him the emotions were real, but he understood better than most how aura manipulation could fake emotions.

“I got my soul personally tortured by the Builder, which kicked off more than a little bit of a feud,” he taunted. “The very fact that you know this is because he hired a god to take me out, which is where you came in. You’re not going to tell me you topped that, which makes me a better mother than you ever were.”

“I’m going to fulfil the Builder’s request in this tunnel,” she snarled.

“Is that so?”

“I know your powers, Asano.”

“They’re pretty awesome, right?”

“And you’ve compared our skills.”

“Your technique is also awesome, although getting angry makes you sloppy. Unless you’re faking it. I’ve had this problem with women before.”

“I also know you like to put your enemies off with babble. That won’t work on me. Nothing you have will work on me.”

“It’s called banter, lady. If you’re going to do it, at least learn the nomenclature. And I also use it to mask my nervousness in tense situations. This definitely counts, given how many times you’ve tried to stab me already. So I’m going to keep the banter coming if it’s all the same to you.”

“I know everything you can do, Asano. You can’t escape and you can’t beat me. There’s nowhere to hide and I can cleanse your afflictions as fast as you can put them on if you can’t hit me with that blade. Needing attacks to initialise your

affliction suite is just one of the weaknesses I can exploit. I know them all.”

“There are a lot of them,” Jason acknowledged. “If I ever see one of those anime-haired celestines wearing a sailor uniform, fighting a tentacle monster, I’m going to do something I regret.”

As Melody’s brow creased with the slightest indication of confusion, Jason initiated the attack for the first time. As Melody had predicted, his blade failed to find purchase on her before they once more broke away and went back to slowly eyeing one another off, swords held in front of them.

“I was trained in the Way of the Reaper before you were born,” she told him.

“And you’re still silver rank? Rough couple of decades?”

“Yes,” she admitted, and when his eyebrows lifted in surprise, she struck. Jason had been using a combination of body language and aura to feint an opening and finally managed to score a glancing hit.

- Special Attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin] and [Tainted Meridians] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
- Weapon [Hegemon’s Will] has inflicted [Hegemon’s Tribute], [Vulnerable], [Corrosion], [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
- Due to item set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon], Weapon [Hegemon’s Will] has inflicted [Hegemon’s Tribute] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].

- Weapon [Hegemon’s Will] has bestowed an instance of [Benevolent Hegemon] on you.

- Item [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed eight instances of [Guardian's Blessing] on you.
- Due to item set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon], item [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed eight instances of [Hegemon's Authority] on you.

Jason ignored the system message, but a glimpse of something in it distracted him, which was all Melody needed to score a clean hit, raking her blade across his chest. The blade skittered across a barrier before it broke and dug into flesh, shielding him from a portion of the damage.

- All instances of [Guardian's Blessing] have been consumed to absorb damage.
- Each instance of [Guardian's Blessing] has bestowed [Blessing's Bounty].

- You have been inflicted with [Creeping Death].
- You have resisted [Creeping Death].
- You have gained an instance of [Resistant] from ability [Sin Eater].
- You have gained an instance of [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].

- You have been inflicted with [Purifying Flame].
- You have resisted [Purifying Flame].
- You have gained an instance of [Resistant] from ability [Sin Eater].

- You have gained an instance of [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].
- Resisting [Purifying Flame] has inflicted you with [Inexorable Purgation].
- [Inexorable Purgation] cannot be resisted.
- [Inexorable Purgation] has been moved to [Hegemon's Dominion]. If you return [Hegemon's Will] to the scabbard, the next attack made with it will inflict [Inexorable Purgation].
- [Purifying Flame] (affliction, wounding, fire, holy, dispel): Inflict ongoing fire damage and periodically negate a boon of the magic, elemental or unholy types.
- [Inexorable Purgation] (affliction, holy, stacking): [Purifying Flame] is more difficult to resist. This affliction cannot be resisted. This affliction is negated when the victim is afflicted with [Purifying Flame]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Melody didn't let up the advantage, following up with a rapid sequence of jabbing thrusts. On the third strike, he pushed his body into her lunge, sliding himself onto her blade to arrest its movement. Silver flame erupted inside his body but he showed

no reaction as he gripped her sword arm and pulled her face to face.

She found herself staring into alien eyes, within the void-like darkness of his hood, as he chanted a spell in a voice of arctic stone.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

The strength of Jason’s Punition spell was based on the number of afflictions the enemy had, and only a handful were on Melody. Jason had learned his lesson about waiting for the perfect moment with Purity worshippers, though, taking the damage where he could get it. The necrotic damage wasn’t a lot, but every attack she had landed or even that he’d blocked had affected her with the Sin affliction, amplifying necrosis.

She kicked him off her blade, her high-end silver strength noticeably superior to his, and they both staggered back. Her skin was flecked with black pockmarks of necrosis while his chest wounds were burning with ethereal silver flames. In both cases, normal recovery was impeded, hers by the hard-to-heal necrotic damage and his by the fire burning the wounds. They both had answers, however, and they chose not to immediately re-engage as they paused to recover.

Jason simply waited for his regeneration effects to heal him, the flame sputtering out as the affliction was absorbed by his scabbard. The rate at which it absorbed afflictions was accelerated by suppressing the aura of the afflictions originator, and Jason’s aura pushed hard on Melody’s. He didn’t entirely suppress it because reading her emotions was one of the edges helping him against her superior speed, strength and skill.

As for Melody, she slapped her upper arm and a rune stitched into her sleeve glowed briefly before vanishing. The Church of Purity excelled in the creation of dispelling and cleansing items, and the consumable rune immediately purged Jason’s afflictions. Jason’s affliction powers were not to be ignored, however, and the cleansing came at a price. His Punition spell, in addition to afflicting damage, had left behind an unwelcome gift in the form of the Penitence affliction.

- [Rune of Greater Purgation (silver)] had triggered a strong cleansing on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - All afflictions on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)] have been cleansed.
 - Cleansing your afflictions has triggered [Penitence].
 - [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)] has been afflicted with an instance of [Penance] for each cleansed affliction.
-
- [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Inflicts an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from an enemy with this affliction.
-
- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

The damage from Penance was limited by the number of afflictions, making it far from debilitating to a silver-ranker, but the transcendent damage was unavoidable, chiselling away at her health. Melody took a healing potion from her belt, drained the vial and tossed it aside. Jason didn't push the attack.

“You're not weak, I'll give you that,” she told him. “You aren't going to win, though, and you know it. The environment matters a lot to your combat style and this place advantages me. I'm faster, stronger and better. You wouldn't believe how

many healing and cleansing items I have, so I can let you hurt me here and there. You can only beat me if your afflictions reach a threshold where they escalate past the point of recovery being possible.”

“You really are like your daughter,” Jason said. “Not just the looks either. You probably don’t know what the genetic lottery is, but you ladies are big winners. It’s your personalities that make you alike, though.”

“How so?” Melody asked, surprising Jason with curiosity and an undercurrent of longing in her aura.

“You seem to know *a lot* about me,” Jason told her. “Your daughter had a thing for me too.”

Melody glowered at him, but this time, she didn’t make an angry lunge at him. She looked at where she had wounded him, the flesh already knitted back together and the robes repaired over them.

“I was curious to talk with you,” she said. “You’re important to my daughter, and I was wondering what grabbed the Builder’s attention.”

“And?”

“Not impressed.”

“I need to start using food to make a first impression with women. This getting kicked in the face approach isn’t working out. Can I offer you a chocolate cake sandwich?”

“I’ve seen enough,” she said. “With your healing, I’m going to have to be more thorough in taking you down. No more chats.”

“But that’s the best part. Besides, you haven’t even seen how I’m going to beat you yet.”

“You don’t have anything that can beat me.”

“I didn’t when your three minions ambushed me as I was going about my business, but you’ll find it’s different now. I have something new to rely on.”

“You mean that sword? It’s pretty, but it’ll take more than that.”

Jason laughed.

“No, it’s a power that you’ve overlooked, even though it’s the same power that beat the Builder.”

She tilted her head in a gesture of curiosity.

“Do tell, Mr Asano.”

“It’s Jason, please. You’re my friend’s mum. Anyway, the reason you overlooked this power is that magic is too easy in this world. Magic is so rich here, you can literally find it just lying around as essences and awakening stones. In my world, magic is a struggle. You have to work and scrape for it, but in doing so, you find pathways to power that people from this world would never consider.”

“Such as?”

“Here, magic is so rich, you can just pick it up off the ground. But in my world...”

He paused just as the wall between them exploded inward, dust billowing and chunks of stone splashing into the water that drained out through the hole.

“...friendship is magic,” Jason finished as the sound died down.

Melody raised her sword warily as she and Jason stared at one another through the stone dust, but Jason didn’t move. Instead, Sophie came through the hole in a blur, immediately lashing out at Melody. Taken aback by the sudden confrontation with her daughter, Melody backed off, showing far less aptitude than she had against Jason. Jason’s aura crashed down on her as the rest of the team came pouring through the hole. Melody’s aura was suppressed, she was outnumbered and she had completely lost the momentum. The suddenly one-sided fight came to an end when Jason tapped her lightly with his sword as Humphrey and Neil gripped her arms.

- You have cleansed all holy afflictions from [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
- Weapon [Hegemon's Will] has inflicted multiple instances of [Hegemon's Mercy] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
- [Hegemon's Mercy] (affliction, holy, stacking): The victim of this effect is subjected to a powerful suppressive force affecting all magical abilities. This affects essence abilities, innate abilities and item abilities. Abilities derived from external transcendent sources are affected more strongly. This affliction drops off rapidly when not within the area of the wielder of [Hegemon's Will]'s aura. Additional instances have increased effect.

The handful of Penance instances left on Melody translated to only a mild suppressing effect. It was still enough that, when combined with a fully suppressed aura, Clive was able to snap a suppression collar around her neck. She thrashed in wild struggle, but both Neil and Humphrey were stronger, holding her in place as Clive locked the collar.

Melody slumped, but her face locked on her daughter's. Sophie looked at her mother impassively, then slipped a bag over her head. Neil started shoving their prisoner towards the hole in the wall where water was draining out. Humphrey gathered up Sophie in a hug while Clive and Jason looked on awkwardly.

“Being able to sense you working on the other side of the wall was amazing,” Jason said to Clive. “I don't think I've ever found my aura senses so useful.”

“I don't think it was strictly necessary,” Clive said. “One of Shade's bodies led us to you.”

“No, I mean with timing the line you guys entered with. My banter game was on point.”

Jason’s eyes went wide, then he groaned unhappily.

“What’s wrong?” Clive asked and Jason gave him a forlorn look.

“I just realised she doesn’t know what *My Little Pony* is,” he said. “She totally didn’t get the reference.”

Sophie looked at him from over Humphrey’s bicep.

“Why would you expect that?” she asked. “No one ever does.”

NOSTALGIA

WHEN THE TWO GOLD-RANKERS RACING TO THE UNDERWATER mining facility arrived at the submarine dock, they found the surface of the water sealed with a magical barrier, shimmering red with shifting yellow runes. The barrier was only from a bronze-rank ritual, so they easily forced their way through. The barrier repaired itself immediately, with the water that came through with them pooling on top of its horizontal surface.

Leaping from the barrier onto the docks, they found it full of people. There were no vehicles present, but the dock was lined with anxious civilians. A handful of corpses were piled behind some crates, thick blood trails showing where they had been moved from. The tunnels leading deeper into the complex were all blocked by shimmering magical barriers, behind which the tunnels were flooded with water.

Ritualist adventurers were maintaining the barriers blocking the tunnels, as well as the surface of the water where the gold-rankers had breached their way in. Other adventurers had opened up portals through which civilians were filing through to safety. The facility staff were almost entirely iron or bronze rank, consuming only a fragment of a silver-rank portal's energy with their passage. For every silver-ranker that could have passed through, ten bronze or a hundred iron-rankers could do so instead.

The gold-rankers quickly assessed the room, spotting the group that was in charge. One of the gold-rankers went straight for the team leader, Korinne Pescos, who was calmly

issuing directions to bring the dock to order. The other gold-ranker moved to a member of her team, Orin Pensinata.

The approach of the gold-rankers did not go unnoticed. Waves of relief flooded the auras of adventurers and civilians alike, reassured by the presence of the two powerful figures. Korinne recognised the gold-ranker approaching her and hurried to give a report.

“Lord Ferringhaas, sir. We were mid-evacuation when the sabotage we were warned of took place. The extraction teams were chosen for having ritualists and water or air manipulators, or had them attached specifically in case of this circumstance. Accordingly, our teams managed to safeguard civilians that were en route to this extraction point. Operations have continued, but at a slower pace.”

“Civilian status?” Ferringhaas asked.

“Live civilians are either sealed in safe rooms, waiting for rescue, en route to this dock, in this dock or extracted to Rimaros via portal. We’ve confirmed that some have fallen to hostiles, either caught outside safe rooms or in safe rooms that have been breached. Presumably, any live civilians caught outside of the safe rooms following the sabotage are either trapped or dead, but until the hostiles are cleared, a methodical search is impractical.”

“Disposition of the hostiles?”

“A large portion of them departed with all vehicles in the dock, both their own and a submarine transport full of materials. According to civilian witnesses that had already been rescued, the adventurer team assigned to hold the dock turned traitor, helping them extract and going with them.”

Ferringhaas scowled at the news of traitors.

“They really were...” he muttered.

“Sir?”

“They didn’t kill the civilian witnesses?” Ferringhaas asked, schooling his expression.

“They did not kill any civilians outside of two who made trouble for them, we believe due to time constraints. Once they discovered our rapid response, and especially once the sabotage took place, they seem to have taken the people they had and the materials they had gathered and left, presumably predicting your arrival. We believe a large number of hostiles were abandoned in the base and are still active.”

“Adventurer casualties?”

“Injuries, including several severe ones that proved resistant to healing. No deaths. Many of the enemy have the means to impede healing of the wounds they inflict, primarily through variants of silver fire.”

“This is the same fire they were reported as using when encountered during the Builder island expedition?”

“Yes, sir. We have some people who were on that expedition as well and confirmed it. Our severely injured were priority evacuated. A large portion of the enemy forces are non-essence users and believed to be victims of the modified clockwork cores seen during the Builder island expedition.”

“The ‘pure converted’ we were informed of.”

“Yes, sir. They are notably weaker than essence users, but the primary source of the silver fire. These pure converted are believed to be the bulk of enemy forces remaining. From what we could determine, the Order of Redeeming Light members mostly assumed lower-risk roles in the operation. This allowed them to be notified and react more quickly to our arrival. That said, we believe that at least several teams with essence users made their way into the deeper areas of the complex for reasons unknown.”

“Enemy casualties?”

“Numerous pure converted; we don’t have a good count, but several dozen at a minimum. Most of the essence users encountered were not anticipating such a rapid response and we caught them on the back foot. Silver-rankers are not so easily killed, though, so many were able to escape deeper into the complex. Including the ones killed that were guarding the

dock on our arrival, we have eliminated fourteen silver-rank essence users. We estimate between nine and twenty-five more enemy essence users are still unaccounted for within the complex, along with an unknown number of pure converted.”

“That would be a larger deployment of forces than the Builder island raid,” Ferringhaas assessed.

“Yes, sir. My best guess would be that this operation was considered lower-risk as they did not anticipate the Adventure Society reacting as quickly as we have. This may even be the bulk of their local forces.”

“I’m going to reinstitute the capture order,” Ferringhaas said, “but only as a low-priority if safe to do so. If encountering the enemy having trouble with the post-sabotage conditions, capture is acceptable *only* if safe. Otherwise, the kill-on-sight order remains in effect. More than anything enemy-related, first priority is evacuating civilians. No one is to compromise rescuee safety over pursuing enemies. Make sure that all expedition teams are notified.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Korinne briefed Ferringhaas, the other gold-ranker went to the person he knew from her team to get his own briefing. Orin was organising people going through a portal when he sensed his gold-rank uncle approaching. His uncle inclined his head slightly back and Orin furrowed his brow. The uncle gave a slight nod and then wandered over to where Korinne was going over specifics of estimated ally and enemy locations on a projected map.

Another of Korinne’s team members, Rosa, nudged the much-larger Orin with her shoulder.

“You two are as talkative as ever, I see.”

Orin nodded.

“Given how deep we are in the facility,” Humphrey said, “I think trying to make our own way out is a mistake.”

“Agreed,” Clive said. “Using ritual magic to dig through walls and take down barriers, all while managing the water that’s been caught up in various sections isn’t practical. Not all the way back to the dock. We might all have equipment for fighting underwater, but conducting rituals underwater is something else.”

The team had retrieved Jason’s bright orange magical swimming belt, which was now secured around his waist.

“Do we even have the ritual materials to get back up?” Neil asked.

“No,” Clive said. “It’s an outside chance that we could stretch what we have, if everything went right, but...”

He gestured at the tunnel in which they were standing in water up to their knees, buried deep under the seafloor.

“...I don’t think it’s an everything-goes-right kind of day.”

“There’s a safe room not far from where we are,” Jason said, checking his map ability. “We can join the people there and wait to get rescued with everyone else.”

Jason allowed the others to see his map and plotted out a route using waypoints.

“That looks viable, so long as the flooding in the intervening chambers isn’t too bad,” Clive said.

Following the deliberate flooding of the facility, all the rooms had been magically isolated. The magical barriers were safety measures put in place to isolate flooding and had automatically triggered, sealing chambers and segmenting tunnels. Only the comprehensive disabling of safety systems allowed the water to spread throughout the complex before the barriers went active.

With no appropriate essence abilities to deal with the water, the team was reliant on Clive to either disable barriers or dig through walls. Other chambers and tunnel segments could easily be deeply flooded, which was one of the reasons they preferred negating barriers. They could see through barriers to gauge how much water was in the next chamber, and disabling them was much easier than digging through

magic stone. It usually required metres of tunnelling to reach the next tunnel or chamber, which they were opening relatively blind. Jason's senses could reach through one or two walls but were significantly dulled in doing so.

They travelled with Sophie, keeping a tight grip and a tight watch on their prisoner. Melody was not just collared and manacled but also hooded. It was no ordinary hood, but one that could seal the enhanced perception and magical senses of a silver-ranker. At least, silver-rankers that weren't outliers like Jason.

"Where did you get that hood?" Neil asked Sophie.

"From Belinda."

"Why did she have it? It's not like we knew we were coming to grab someone ahead of time."

"I don't know," Sophie said. "You'll have to ask her yourself."

Neil looked at Belinda, who was merrily nibbling on a gingerbread man as she waded through the icy seawater.

"It's probably best I don't know, now that I think about it."

They made their way through tunnels along Jason's mapped route. Some sealed sections were all but empty of water, lowering the level in the tunnels they travelled through as they were opened. Others had enough water to raise the level, although that was not the most unpleasant thing the tunnels could contain.

The team found themselves looking through an intact barrier wall into a section of tunnel entirely flooded with water. Floating within was a trio of corpses, their lingering auras marking them as iron-rankers.

"Probably came this deep into the complex to hide from the Purity worshippers," Neil said, watching the floating bodies with a sombre expression, tinged with anger.

"Do we take them out of there?" Humphrey asked. "It doesn't seem right to leave them."

“I’m not sure it’s any better to take them,” Clive said. “We don’t have any caskets.”

Clive, Jason and Humphrey shared a look between them. Before they were a team, their first contract together was to retrieve the body of a fallen adventurer. They had been supplied with a special casket to contain the body before it was placed in storage, but it was only a symbolic gesture.

When putting a body in a storage space, there was no practical difference between respectfully placing it in a casket first and just throwing it in like a spare sword. The casket accomplished nothing and there was no contamination within storage spaces unless strange and extremely unusual magic was involved. They all knew that the bodies were empty shells, the soul not being an unproven concept to any of them. Even so, none of them wanted to treat the victims with anything but respect. These people weren’t fighters but had been doing their part to produce essential supplies that helped save people during the monster surge. They might not be adventurers, but they were comrades.

“They’ll be taken care of when this place is recovered,” Jason said.

“That won’t be until after the monster surge, at least,” Humphrey said. “It might be a strategic resource but not important enough to undo everything done here. Those people will be down here for weeks, at least. We still don’t know how long this extended monster surge will last.”

“Don’t underestimate what some logistics specialists with water and earth essences can do,” Neil said.

“Neil’s right,” Clive said. “Remember that the Amouz family specialise in dealing with places like this. Not every elite essence user is an adventurer specialised in killing.”

Jason thought back to his early days in Greenstone where he’d watched essence users building a public toilet. He’d stood and watched for hours, the friendly construction workers surprised and happy that someone found what they were doing interesting as they answered his many questions. He frowned, uncertain if it was good or bad that his nostalgia was triggered

by corpses buried somewhere an oil derrick would have trouble reaching.

“Let’s leave them to their rest,” he said, pulling up his map. “It looks like the best way to go is actually to drop down through the floor and follow a parallel tunnel, then back up on the other side.”

“Not a bad way to detour,” Clive said. “If the chamber below is full of water, it won’t spill in, and if the one we dig up into is, it can drain down.”

The tunnel below turned out to be a good pick. The chamber they dropped into had only waist-deep water, even after their original tunnel section drained into it. The next two sections of tunnel were almost empty, so dropping the barriers lowered the water level to barely mid-shin. Clive needed to set the next ritual on the ceiling so they could go back up, but as a silver-ranker, he could levitate so long as his concentration wasn’t interrupted.

While Clive was working, Jason felt something tingle at the edge of his perception, muffled as it was by the magical deep granite.

“Shade,” he said, and the familiar emerged as Jason moved to the side of the tunnel and pushed his senses against the dulling force of the deep granite. He closed his eyes, placed his hands against the wall and braced himself as if trying to push it over. Extending his senses through the suppressive force of the stone was like trying to push custard through a mattress.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“One of Shade’s bodies,” he said, strain in his voice. “I’m trying to let him know we’re here. There’s someone with him too.”

“Princess Liara’s husband,” Shade said. “I can almost contact my other self and memories are trickling through.”

Jason leaned back from the wall, tension dropping out of his shoulders.

“If we dig up, make our way along the tunnel to the intersection and then go right instead of left towards the safe room, we’ll find them,” he said. “It shouldn’t be much of a detour.”

SAVING THE DAY WITH THE POWER OF QUIPS

THAT THE TWO GOLD-RANKERS SENT TO THE UNDERWATER facility had been available was a stroke of good fortune. Claud Ferringhaas was an expert manipulator of water and stone, with his earth, water, shovel and verdant essences. He was an agricultural expert and only part-time adventurer, although his combat abilities were in no way lacking.

Amos Pensinata was pure adventurer, with the might, vast, deep and leviathan essences. He had spent the bulk of the monster surge handling the ocean monsters that were often the most dangerous in the Sea of Storms. Although he lacked the water essence, his powers made him extremely comfortable in the depths.

More important than his specific powers was Amos' aura strength. Like Jason, his aura was oppressively powerful compared to others of his rank, and he stood a full rank over Jason. Also, like Jason, his aura strength did not come from being a fourfold with overlapping aura powers. Jason was not the only one to endure tribulations of the soul.

Where Jason could extend his senses through a room, maybe two, Amos was able to push his perception to encompass a third of the facility. He was also strong enough to breach the water-sealing barriers segmenting the tunnels through raw physical might.

After being updated on the status of the facility by Korinne Pescos, a plan was quickly devised to find and evacuate the trapped facility workers most efficiently. Supported by the silver-rank adventurers, the gold-rankers set out.

Baseph Rimaros was in a dry chamber, having triggered the seal walls in a section of tunnel early to protect himself from the flooding and to await rescue. Until that point, he had been in a state of relentless tension. While sneaking around the complex, he had passed within arm's reach of capture more than once. The ramifications of failure had scraped his nerves like a knife.

Now that the sabotage had been carried out and he was relatively safe, awaiting rescue, the tension had left him and he sat, back to the wall, with his knees up and his arms clutched around them. He was numb in the aftermath, left with nothing to do but dwell on the ramifications of his success.

How many colleagues had died as a result of his actions? How many friends? Because of his sinister companion, Baseph now knew that a rescue operation had already been underway, perhaps even before he started. His desperate actions had not just been a danger but a needless one. He had wanted to save people, but how many had drowned while being escorted to what would have been safety if not for him?

“It was all pointless,” he muttered, almost trance-like.

“You acted in a manner appropriate to the information you had available. That is all that can be asked of anyone,” Shade said. “I know a man who has done this and gotten it wrong, but he does not let that stop him from doing it again. In times of crisis, inaction is often worse than the wrong action.”

“Do you think people died because of what I did?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” Shade said.

“Innocent people, I mean?”

“Yes; the non-innocent have most likely survived. The best information we have is that the Order of Redeeming Light's essence users are silver rank and well-trained, with their

leadership at the very least being of guild standard. Many have likely been inconvenienced or trapped entirely but not killed.”

Baseph’s head drooped.

“It is possible,” Shade continued, “that the order’s forces made up of people implanted with purified clockwork cores are more susceptible to drowning, but I do not have the information to confirm or deny this.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Baseph said. “Clockwork what?”

“I shall spare you the lengthy explanation, but there is a device that can turn regular essence users into what we believe are obedient slaves to the Order of Redeeming Light. The best information we have suggests that this implantation can be done involuntarily, which would mean that these Purity converted are actually victims. This, arguably, could mean that they are innocent of the very actions they are carrying out.”

“I didn’t think mind control was possible, even with magic.”

“It is not. It is, more accurately, a very comprehensive form of body control that includes the physiological mechanisms that comprise the ability to think. Thus, the body is controlled by a hostile force, but there may be memories or personality traits that linger, depending on the nature of the transformation. Lesser vampirism and other hostile transformative abilities operate in this manner. The soul remains intact, but is no longer in control of the body.”

Baseph looked up at the shadowy figure, curious despite himself as the explanation continued.

“Essence users make the most, and sometimes only, viable subjects of such transformations. Their bodies have already been altered to draw power from the soul to fuel their abilities, a power such transformations rely upon. They cannot forcibly violate the soul, even with a complete transformation, but if the body is already able to harmlessly tap into the soul’s effectively infinite power, it can continue to do so, even if the body is modified to use that power in different ways.”

“The soul stays intact?”

“Yes, but the body generally cannot be recovered once the transformation is complete, even if the soul is unsullied. In most cases, only death can release the trapped soul from a fully transformed state. I have seen this many times.”

“Was your soul trapped? Is that how you ended up a shadow person?”

“I have ever been a shadow, since my inception. I have no soul, strictly speaking, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that my true state is something akin to a soul. I was bound once, and made custodian of many souls that were trapped in hideous, transformed and—worst of all—immortal bodies. I then became the familiar of a man who released all of those souls, by slaying the monstrosities that they had become.”

“Why are you telling me all of this? Any of this?”

“Because you are in a fragile mental state and I am attempting to distract you. According to your wife, you are a curious person who enjoys learning new things, whether they are in your field of expertise or otherwise.”

“She told you that?”

“She and I spent an amount of time together over the last few days. I am a very good listener, although I do not believe that I excel at comforting others.”

“That,” Baseph said, “is an accurate assessment.”

Jason dashed backwards, away from the wall barrier sealing one of the pathways in the four-way intersection. Aside from the one they had entered, the other tunnels were sealed as well.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“I sensed something gold rank. Not an essence user or a monster. One of the Purity converted, I think, but I pulled my perception back before I got a good sense of it.”

“Did it notice you?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “The converted have poor senses in general, from what we’ve seen, and it’ll be worse in this place. I have to push hard to sense that far, though, so I wasn’t exactly being stealthy.”

“That’s the direction of the closest safe room, right?” Neil said. “The princess’ husband is the other way, so how about we go that way?”

“If the gold-ranker is one of the converted, we could likely handle it,” Humphrey said. “Perhaps we should deal with it before it comes across someone that can’t. As Neil said, the closest safe room is in that direction.”

“That would make the someone that can’t deal with it us,” Jason said. “A gold rank anything isn’t to be taken lightly. If we had preparation, knowledge of its abilities and an advantageous environment, that would be one thing. Being stuck in a room with a gold-rank weaponised victim is another.”

Neil tilted his head, tapping his ear with his palm as if trying to shake loose an obstruction.

“I could swear I just heard Jason say something sensible.”

“But what if people need help?” Humphrey asked.

“Then we hope the gold-rankers get to them in time,” Jason said. “They almost certainly have arrived by now. Humphrey, listen to someone who has sacrificed his life more than once to help people. You have to know when you’re walking up to the line and when you’re stepping over. Going after that gold-rank converted would be way over, even if it were alone. Which it isn’t.”

“We’re here to save the lives we can,” Clive agreed, “not to throw more away over the ones we can’t.”

Jason looked at Humphrey’s face, filled with frustrated reluctance. He stepped in front of him and put a hand on his shoulder, looking him square in the eye.

“I know what you’re feeling,” Jason said. “Something inside you is screaming that it can win if you want it enough. But it can’t. Believe me. I’ve been *through this and worse*. Every person you can’t save will be a scavenger gnawing at your gut and there’s nothing you can do about that. You save the ones you can, regret the ones you can’t and let them drive you to get stronger. Then, the next time, you can save more.”

Jason gave Humphrey a sad smile. In his eyes, the big man was a silver-age comic hero, complete with wedge-shaped torso and a jaw so square, it could be mortared into a wall. He did not do well stuck in a crappy, grimdark reboot. If Jason’s time on Earth had taught him anything, it was that if you let the darkness take hold of you, it wouldn’t stop pulling you down. There were worse things than saving the day with the power of quips.

“Come on,” Jason told him. “The beautiful princess might be too strong to get captured in the first place, but her husband could use a storybook hero.”

Jason slapped Humphrey’s enormous bicep.

“That’s you, bloke.”

The gold-rankers moved separately, undertaking different tasks. Ferringhaas was using his water and earth manipulation to establish safe pathways into and out of the complex, making his way slowly down through the facility’s levels. Amos was using his powerful senses to find more time-critical situations in which to intervene. He moved through tunnels regardless of their water level, the liquid impeding him no more than the air. The barrier walls slowed him little more than the water as he smashed through them like a bullet passing through layers of glass.

As he moved, Amos left behind a trail of lingering aura, a trick he had picked up that used pure aura control rather than any ability. It was imbued with an inherent hostility towards Purity worshippers while offering comfort to anyone else. Any

adventurer would inherently sense its friendliness and follow it one way or another, either to safety or to Amos. Any enemy bold enough to follow it to the dock would find a gaggle of adventurers waiting for them, which would go poorly. If they instead followed it to Amos, that would go worse.

The various chambers and tunnel sections occupied by more than water were what slowed Amos' progress. Trapped civilians and adventurers he released were able to follow his path back out, although the waist-deep water troubled the iron-rankers. With the icy cold of the sea depths, it made for an unpleasant trip to the dock.

Enemies were a different story. Most of the safe rooms and enemies had already been cleared from the upper levels, so Amos didn't sense any until his perception reached the central areas of the complex. The enemies he sensed that were trapped he left alone, but if he found a roaming group, he moved on them. As Jason had pointed out, being in an enclosed space with a gold-rank enemy was not healthy for silver-rankers and Amos left Ferringhaas' direction to take prisoners if possible to others.

Sensing a group of adventurers whose auras told a story of trouble, Amos made his way swiftly through the passages, at one point smashing through a tunnel wall because it was only a metre of solid, magically empowered stone. He found a team of adventurers moving with one of their members on a floating magical gurney, covered in burns that left strange patterns on the flesh. The others were all various levels of injured, despite the healer working as they moved, most of them showing at least some sign of the strange burn marks.

A bedraggled female adventurer with scorched armour waved her team to keep going as she stopped in front of Amos to report, marking her as the team leader. Amos ignored her, looking at the man on the gurney as he gestured the whole team to a stop.

“Healing impaired?” Amos asked in a gravel-slurry voice.

“Yeah,” the healer grimly confirmed. He was working on the other team members and not the injured unconscious man

covered in burns. “Nothing I have works. Potions, abilities; I even have some ointment specifically designed for burns with wounding effects, but nothing. We stopped to perform a ritual enhanced ability; still nothing. I just don’t...”

The healer shook his head and went back to healing another team member with a green glow that emitted from his palm.

“We encountered a gold-rank pure converted in the lower levels,” the team leader reported. “It was moving with a team of Purity essence users. We drove them off, or maybe they drove us off; I’m not sure at this point. We managed to kill one of the essence users, but they got one of ours and...”

She turned to look at the unconscious man as if moving her head was physically hard, mouth trembling as her face filled with impotent rage and creeping shame.

“...probably a second.”

“No.” Amos pulled a potion vial not from his belt in which they were lined up but from a dimensional pouch at his belt. The vial glowed brightly with blue, gold and silver light.

“Is that a superior miracle potion?” the healer asked, looking on in awe.

“Greater,” Amos corrected.

“Greater?” the team member being healed exclaimed. “Do you know what that’s worth?”

Amos glanced at the man, his square brick of a face etched with disdain before turning back to the unconscious man.

“Not as much as this,” he said and shoved the unconscious man’s mouth open with his fingers before pouring in the vial and then clamping the mouth shut with his hand.

The result was immediate as transcendent light shone from within. The strange burn marks faded, dissolving into rainbow smoke that formed a noxious cloud over the gurney. The team backed off while Amos ignored it, his eyes locked onto the man who was glowing with increasingly bright light.

After the light dimmed, they saw the man on the gurney stirring but still unconscious. There was no visible injury remaining, although the blood, grime and tattered clothes showed that there had been plenty. Just as the light faded to nothing, another light shone from his body, this one silver.

“Gift transfiguration?” the healer muttered. “Lord Pensinata, this man is going to owe you deeply.”

“And I’ll collect,” Amos said. “There’s always work to be done.”

KEEP IT LIGHT

THE TEAM WAS ONLY ONE TUNNEL SEGMENT AWAY FROM Baseph Rimaros, but that segment was filled with water.

“It should be fine,” Clive said. “It’ll drain into the hole we came up through.”

As Clive went to work bringing down the next barrier wall, Jason reached out through Shade to contact Baseph. He was still hunched against the wall when a new voice emerged from his shadowy companion, Shade.

“Lord Rimaros,” the voice said. “We’ll have you out of there shortly.”

“Who are you?” Baseph asked.

“I was a retail stationery assistant manager, and good at my job, until I committed the ultimate sin and testified against other retail stationery assistant managers gone bad. Retail stationary assistant managers that tried to kill me, but got the woman I loved instead— ow! Hey, that kind of— Ow! That was right on the ear. What? I know I’m silver rank, what about it? I should never have let you all listen in with voice chat.”

“Hello?” Baseph asked uncertainly. “Shade?”

“My name’s Jason,” the voice returned, now sounding sullen. “Don’t worry, mate; we’ll have you out of there in a jiffy.”

“Uh, I hesitate to ask again, but who are you? Adventurers?”

“Yep.”

“How did you respond so quickly to the incursion? Did the Amouz family guards get the signal out?”

“No,” Jason said, the amusement gone from his voice. “Unfortunately, the enemy caught them by surprise before they could. As for what did happen, that’s restricted information. Your wife might tell you, although I’m pretty sure she shouldn’t.”

“How bad is it out there?”

“We’re not sure. Communication is tricky here, as you know, but we came in knowing the potential for the facility to be sabotaged as a defensive measure. Preparations were made to save as many lives as possible.”

“I.. I was the one who sabotaged the facility.”

“I know, Lord Rimaros,” Jason said softly.

On the tunnel section where the team was, Jason cut off the communication between himself and Shade, then turned to Humphrey.

“Let’s make sure he doesn’t see the floating bodies when we’re going back the other way, yeah?” Jason said. “This bloke’s aura has so much guilt in it, he’s just about ready to crack.”

As Clive continued preparing the ritual to disable the wall barrier, Jason returned to his conversation with Baseph.

“We’re an adventuring team that is part of a comprehensive rescue effort, evacuating the complex. First priority is saving lives, and it’s a lot harder for the bad guys to break into the safe rooms when the tunnel in front of them is flooded.”

“Are we sure Jason is really helping?” Sophie asked.

“For the purposes of keeping that guy from losing it,” Neil said, “yes, he is. Lord Rimaros will be harder to deal with if he’s panicking or shutting down completely.”

Baseph couldn’t hear the others through Shade and Jason kept talking to help keep him balanced.

“Things have gotten a little complicated and we don’t have the resources to make it all the way back to the top. We’re going to get you out of there and then join the people in a nearby safe room. From there, we’ll wait it out until a more thorough recovery operation is organised.”

It didn’t take long before Clive told the group to brace and he dropped the barrier, letting the flooded section of tunnel wash out. The water level quickly dropped as it rushed past them, eventually draining into the hole leading down to a lower tunnel. Jason became shrouded in dark mist for a few moments, which cleared to reveal him in a white casual summer suit and matching Panama hat.

“Good idea on dropping the dark reaper of blood look,” Neil told him. “Everyone keep it light with the civilians. If we act like the situation is no great crisis, they won’t believe it, but they’ll be at least a little reassured.”

“Have you been taking lessons on mental health from Arabelle?” Jason asked him.

“No, of course not,” Neil said. “Why would I, a healer, take the time to learn about an aspect of healing from a gold-rank healer from my own church—of the Healer—with incredible expertise in her field. Of healing.”

“You said ‘healing’ quite a lot there. I never even noticed you were taking lessons.”

“It’s not all about you, Jason.”

“I did save the world a couple of times.”

“Which suggests you didn’t do a great job the first time.”

“I did my best.”

“Oh, I have no doubt you did.”

“That’s a little hurtful.”

“Did Humphrey and I start a thing?” Sophie asked. “If we’re all going to be pairing off, I definitely won out taking first pick. I really would have imagined Belinda and Clive happening before you two.”

“Life is full of little surprises,” Humphrey added. Jason and Neil looked at them in horror.

“Surprise biscuits?” Belinda asked.

“You just finished eating a gingerbread man,” Humphrey told her.

Belinda hung her head.

“Don’t give me that look,” Humphrey told her.

Clive was keeping his attention on the magic diagram he was drawing in the air with his power.

“Just so you all know,” he pointed out, “there’s a guy on the other side of this wall watching us be very professional adventurers.”

“He can’t hear us though, right?” Jason asked.

“No,” Clive told him.

“Then he probably does think we’re professionals.”

“Not in that hat,” Neil said.

“You wish you could pull off this hat.”

“Yeah,” Neil admitted wistfully.

Jason moved ahead of the group as they approached the tunnel intersection where Jason had sensed the gold-rank Purity converted. He extended his senses once more, as carefully as he could while pushing through the suppressive effects of the deep granite the tunnels were carved from.

“Nothing,” he called back to the group as he headed back. “Looks like they moved on while we were digging out Bas, so we should be alright to move forward.”

“Bas?” Baseph asked.

“Don’t ask him questions,” Clive whispered conspiratorially, fully aware that Jason’s silver-rank senses

would pick up everything. “Even if they seem sensible. You’ll find it’s best to let Jason wash over you and say nothing.”

“You make me sound like a packet of sensuous bath salts,” Jason said, rejoining the group. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. “I’m okay with that.”

“If he starts making sense on a regular basis, that’s when it’s time to worry,” Clive said.

“Don’t listen to them, Bas,” Jason told him as the group moved into the intersection. “They’re just jealous they can’t pull off a hat like mine.”

“That outfit does look good,” Humphrey conceded. “More of an outdoor style, though.”

“If you can convince the zealots to attack a beachside bar next time,” Jason told him, “I’m not going to stop you.”

“It would be nice to not be so busy,” Neil said. “Rimaros would be a nice place to take a holiday once the monster surge is over.”

“Seconded,” Jason agreed.

“Rimaros is a great place for that,” Baseph said. “The post-surge festivals here are world-famous.”

“That’s true,” Humphrey said.

Baseph’s brief smile faded.

“I’m not so sure how it will go, this time. Even buried under the ocean, we’ve heard how things are going up there. I didn’t even see Liara after the attack on Rimaros.”

Jason frowned, knowing that Liara had been in the thick of it deep in the bowels of the flying city.

“These are dark days,” Jason said. “I’m a lot younger than you, Bas, but I’ve seen my share of dark days. If I know that they always come to an end, you must too.”

Baseph nodded, then his eyes drifted down the other unsealed tunnel as they reached the intersection. Two of the four tunnels weren’t blocked with wall barriers, both the one

the team had originally come through and the one they had followed to retrieve Baseph.

“That way?” Baseph asked.

“No,” Humphrey said firmly. “Not that way. Clive?”

Something about Humphrey’s rigid denial had Baseph’s attention fixated on the open tunnel as Clive worked on breaching the next barrier wall.

“There’s something down there, isn’t there?” he asked.

“Yes,” Neil told him, not trying to lie.

“Something you don’t want me to see.”

“Our job,” Humphrey said, “is to get you and as many other people as we can out of this alive. You going down there hurts us more than helps, so I’m going to ask you to not go down there and also to not ask why.”

“Meaning that whatever is down there is worse than what I’m imagining,” Baseph said. “It’s people who died because of what I did, isn’t it?”

The team shared a look, and then Neil gave Baseph a nod. After a moment, Baseph nodded back.

“I think you’re right,” he said. “I don’t think I’m ready to see that.”

The safe rooms were more than just secure doors, although the ten centimetres of magically reinforced metal covered in dangerous-looking sigils were definitely that. Certain varieties of hostile magic were designed to look like explosive traps, from the design of the ritual patterns to the way they glowed. The sigils on the door slowly pulsed an ominous red, invoking the feel of staring down the throat of a fire-breathing monster.

The obvious choice when attempting to intrude was to dig into the room straight through the wall. Beyond just the doors, though, behind the stone walls, the entire safe room was

sheathed in thick metal, laid with traps less overt than the door sigils but no less potent. The safe rooms were designed to live up to their name. While very little could shut out a gold-ranker, even they would not have an easy time gaining access. As for a group of silver-rankers, the difficulty was considerably greater.

Baseph had destroyed his master key to the safe rooms because of the very real threat of being captured in the process of carrying out his sabotage.

“I’m sorry,” he told Jason and his team. “I did everything wrong.”

“You did something,” Jason said. “You have to at least try something to get it wrong. Better to seize your fate than just accept it. Better to die fighting than lie down and take it. I’m something of an authority on this.”

“I’ll try again,” Baseph said, stepping up to the door.

“You need to open up and let us in,” he yelled.

“No,” a female voice came back.

Baseph grumbled under his breath.

“People hiring their goddamn cousins,” he muttered before raising his voice again. “Dammit, Karen, it’s me, Baseph. I’m with a team of adventurers.”

“Then you should be fine,” she yelled back through the door. “Also, you could be a shape-shifter.”

“How would that help?” Baseph yelled. “You can’t see me.”

“Lady,” Sophie yelled, “you better open this door or my foot is going to shape-shift your ass!”

Baseph shook his head and stepped back from the door. “I don’t know who put her in charge of letting people in.”

“Clive, can you open this door?” Humphrey asked.

“Not any time soon, and not without damaging it,” Clive said. “And most likely damaging us worse.”

“Which would defeat the purpose of a safe room,” Neil added.

“What we need is Belinda’s expertise,” Clive said.

Baseph turned in confusion to look at a person he’d been introduced to earlier, along with the rest of the team.

“Aren’t you Belinda?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said with a bright smile. “I like stealing things and recordings of oiled up—”

Sophie’s hand clamped over Belinda’s mouth and she firmly led her friend away.

“Do we try for another safe room?” Humphrey mused aloud.

“I’m running perilously short on ritual materials that will get us through doors and walls,” Clive said. “We could maybe reach another safe room and maybe not.”

“Plus, there are gold-rank bad guys roaming around,” Jason said. “I’m not sure we should even have been yelling like that.”

“Other options?” Humphrey asked.

“Gordon could break down barriers and through walls with his beams,” Jason said. “It would take a lot longer than Clive and his rituals—”

“Which are already quite slow,” Clive added.

“But slow is better than stopped,” Jason finished.

The team were mulling over a selection of poor options when the sigils on the door dimmed and it moved back, then slid to the side to open. As it did, the voices from inside became audible.

“...no telling who they really are.”

“Andres, did I say ‘stop Karen from taking over’ or did I say ‘take a nap and let her run rampant?’”

“You were taking a nap.”

“I’ve been awake for... oh, hey, boss. Sorry about that.”

The team started filing into the room when Jason started wildly gesturing for them to hurry.

“Quick! Get in and shut the door.”

The team did as instructed, rather than question and the door was quickly shut behind them.

“Gold rank?” Humphrey asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It looks like they swung back around.”

ENOUGH TO KILL YOU WITH POWER TO SPARE

WHAT WAS CALLED A SAFE ROOM WAS ACTUALLY SEVERAL rooms, set out like a dormitory. There was a communal room into which the entrance opened, with metal tables and chairs in uniform rows, all affixed to the floor. It reminded Jason of a prison, or at least what prisons looked like in movies and television.

As only the administrative centres on the upper levels employed normal-rankers, the safe rooms in the deeper levels were designed for essence users only. This simplified the logistics—the food storage could be a cupboard full of spirit coins. There was no need for toilet facilities and the only infrastructure that needed to be incorporated was a shower room and systems to cycle air. The back of the communal room led into the sleeping cells where bunks were packed in, a half-dozen to a room.

The team had hurried inside at Jason's urging. Sophie marched their manacled and hooded prisoner to one of the tables and shoved her into a seat as the others looked around. There were around twenty people either standing around or emerging from the bunk rooms to check out the newcomers. Most were celestines, with a scattering of humans and elves. Humphrey had no time for the conditions inside, looking to Jason for an explanation of his sudden urgency.

“Gold-ranker?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Jason answered, his voice grim. “It looks like they swung back around.”

“Will this room hold against a gold-ranker?” Humphrey asked Baseph.

“For a while,” Baseph said. “Maybe only a short while, depending on their specific powers. Nothing short of fortress-town-level defence infrastructure will completely stop a determined gold-ranker. The defences on the door could mess up a silver-ranker, although probably not outright kill them unless they tried to bash the door down with their head and kept trying, regardless of the damage they took.”

“No one’s that idiotic,” Neil said.

Baseph glanced at Karen, who had delayed their entry into the room.

“You should never underestimate what people are capable of,” he said, then quickly introduced the three people who had been waiting on the other side of the door. All were celestines.

“The person who finally let us in is my second, Ciara Amouz. She’s the deputy director of this facility. That’s her assistant, Andres Amouz, and my nephew’s wife’s cousin, Karen something.”

“I’m the associate vice deput—”

“No one cares, Karen,” Andres cut her off.

“There’s no need to be rude, Andres,” Baseph told him.

“You just called her ‘Karen something.’”

“No, I said Karen *Sumptin*. That’s her name.”

Andres gave Baseph a flat look while Ciara shook her head with a wry expression.

Karen opened her mouth, but Baseph held up his hand in a gesture to cut her off.

“Let’s just leave the adventurers to do their job, shall we?”

Karen opened her mouth again and Baseph held up his hand again, this time his gesture being more forceful.

“By which I mean, Karen, that *we shall* leave the adventurers to do their job.”

Baseph shepherded the other civilians away, leaving Jason and the others to plan.

“What about plan B?” Neil asked.

“We’ve gone too far in for that to be a viable option,” Clive said.

Plan B was to use gold-rank coins to try and boost themselves to the point that their portal powers could punch through the suppression of the deep granite into which the facility had been dug.

“That would work for Humphrey and me a third of the way down at most,” Clive said. “Jason could maybe do it as deep as halfway into the complex, but we’re way too deep here. The amount of deep granite around us is massive. A gold-ranker couldn’t portal out of here unless they were a dedicated portal specialist.”

“Leaving us with two options,” Humphrey said, “assuming the gold-ranked converted tries to break in here and doesn’t pass us by. Which it will not. Do we go out and fight it, along with however many essence users and other converted are with it? Or do we wait for it to break in here?”

“Forcing it to break through the defences first could help us,” Clive said. “It may be a gold-ranker, but it’s not an essence user. It should take at least some damage breaking in.”

“That will take time as well,” Sophie pointed out. “If Adventure Society reinforcements arrive while the door is stalling them, that takes a fight we don’t want off our hands.”

“But if they do get in and we have to fight them in here,” Neil countered, “that exposes the safe room and the people inside. They might be fine if we fight the thing in this room and they’re hunkered down in those sleeping rooms, but is ‘might be fine’ a risk we want to take?”

“It’s all about the risk we choose,” Clive said. “Going out or letting them come in; they’re both bad options. We already decided not to go after that thing once, and for good reason.”

“I don’t see an alternative unless they pass us by,” Humphrey said.

“It won’t,” Jason said. “I’m pretty sure it sensed us, and it wasn’t alone. It’s not a question of if it attacks, but when.”

“What about her,” Sophie said, nodding her head in the direction of their prisoner. “Is there any way we can use her?”

“Not as a hostage,” Shade said. “There are others within the Order of Redeeming Light who wish to claim the leadership but have been unable to dislodge Melody. They will be extremely open to letting us do it for them.”

“Maybe she knows something we can use,” Clive suggested.

“I’ll bet she does,” Sophie said. “We can’t trust anything that comes out of her mouth, though.”

Humphrey frowned, staring at the hooded woman for a moment before nodding.

“When all our options are bad,” he said, “expanding our range of bad options may be the best we can do.”

The team looked at each other for a moment, then Sophie stepped up and yanked the hood off Melody’s head. She was left blinking at the sudden absence of the magic that had been suppressing her senses as well as gagging her. After a moment, she looked at the adventurers arrayed in front of her, her eyes settling on Sophie.

“Hello, daughter. Not the reunion I was hoping for.”

“We didn’t take that thing off your head for family time,” Humphrey told her. “If you’re no use to us, I’ll put it right back on.”

“Collar too,” Jason said.

Sophie looked at him in surprise, but he didn’t take his eyes from Melody. She glanced at Humphrey, who nodded.

“Make a move and we will put you down,” Humphrey warned her as Sophie unlocked her suppression collar. Melody gave him an amused laugh.

“So stern, young master Geller, but we all know you’re too much the good little boy to be truly intimidating. If you want

to threaten me, you should have Mr Asano do it. He tries to be a good boy, but we all know what he is deep down.”

“Look, lady,” Jason said, sounding bored. “I love an evil, seductive prisoner even more than the next guy...”

He glanced from Humphrey on one side of him to Neil on the other.

“...well, one out of two.”

“Hey,” Neil said with an affronted expression.

“You’re also my friend’s mum,” Jason continued, “which does *not* make it hotter, whatever Clive might have said.”

“Hey!”

“I’m all for playing silly buggers, by and large, but we don’t have time for that right now,” Jason said, ignoring the looks he got from the rest of his team. “We need to know if you have any information we can use, or back goes the hood and the odds are higher than not that you’ll die before it comes off again.”

Melody looked around the room before looking at her stone-faced daughter and them back to Jason.

“This is one of the safe rooms,” she said.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“And you need something, which means there’s someone out there you think can get in and aren’t confident of being able to handle.”

She turned to Sophie.

“And say what you will about your little friends, daughter; they can handle a lot.”

“We got you chained up with a bag over your head,” Sophie told her.

“Yet you took it off because you need my help.”

“Tell us about the gold-rank converted you brought with you,” Humphrey demanded.

Melody turned to Humphrey with a bored expression.

“I really wish she’d picked the interesting one.”

Sophie moved to put the hood back on.

“Which gold-rank converted?” Melody asked quickly, causing Sophie to pause.

Humphrey looked to Jason, who shrugged.

“I only sensed one,” Jason told him, “but it would make sense if there were more. They probably knew they’d need to break into these safe rooms.”

“You sensed it in this place?” Melody asked. “Ah, the formidable Asano soul power. You realise that—”

Melody was cut off by Sophie’s fist slamming into the side of her face.

“Enough games,” Sophie said. “You need to give us something.”

“We know your friends will be happy to see you die in captivity,” Humphrey said. “Your survival is contingent on ours right now.”

Melody turned to Humphrey, her eyes narrowing.

“How did you react to our raid so quickly?” she asked him.

“You should have picked a place that didn’t have Princess Liara’s husband in charge,” Jason said, jumping in before Humphrey could respond. “She’s a very protective spouse, as it turns out. While your people were running around causing trouble, he was sabotaging the place and setting off a personal distress signal she gave him.”

She turned back to Jason and their eyes locked.

“She’s not going to help us,” he said. “Hood her.”

“He’s right,” Melody said. “I don’t have a way out of this for you.”

“Then you die with us,” Sophie said.

“Oh, you’re a plucky bunch; I daresay we’ll have the chance to chat again. Plenty of mother-daughter tim—”

She was cut off as Sophie jerked the hood over her head, then snapped on the collar.

“Sorry,” she told the others. “That was a waste of time.”

“At least we found out there are more of the gold-rank converted,” Humphrey said.

“Assuming we can trust her,” Neil said. “Which we absolutely can’t.”

“She was telling the truth,” Jason said.

“You’re sure?” Humphrey asked.

“As much as I can be,” Jason said. “Her aura control was good, but not good enough to stop me from reading her emotions. Unless she has some way to falsify them that I’m not familiar with, which I wouldn’t entirely rule out.”

“Oh, that’s why you wanted the collar off,” Neil realised. “You can’t read her aura if it’s completely suppressed.”

“Not that it was a great help.”

“She wasn’t lying, though?” Humphrey asked.

“She only lied once,” Jason said.

“When?” Humphrey asked.

“When she said she wished Sophie had picked the interesting one. I think, in her extremely twisted way, she genuinely does want to reunite with her daughter.”

“By putting me through a bizarre enslavement ritual,” Sophie said angrily.

“Yep,” Jason said. “She also knows that I was lying about how we got here so fast.”

“How?” Humphrey asked.

“Because we knew that her people would turn on her,” Jason said. “She knows we have a spy in her camp now.”

“I’m sorry,” Humphrey said. “That was my mistake.”

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “You haven’t seen as many police procedural interrogations as I have. We definitely can’t trade

her back to her people to make them leave us alone, though. Now, that would compromise Belinda.”

“Where does this leave us?” Clive asked. “We don’t have any more options than we had before. All we learned is that there are even more of the gold-rank converted out there.”

“Well, I do have one plan,” Jason said.

The rest of the team turned to look at him.

“Is it a good plan?” Neil asked.

“About the usual.”

“Then no,” Humphrey said.

“You’re not even going to listen to it?” Jason asked.

“Jason, any time you survive one of your plans, it’s a surprise,” Clive said.

“It’s not that bad.”

“Stalling the elemental tyrant in the waterfall village,” Neil said. “That almost killed you.”

“But it didn’t.”

“Surprisingly.”

“Going against Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva to help Belinda and me,” Sophie said. “That almost got your soul handed over to the Builder, and we’re still dealing with the ramifications of you and Builder hating one another.”

“You actually did die jumping off that tower,” Humphrey said.

“And Farrah said you died twice more while you were gone,” Clive added.

“You’re just cherry-picking now. If...”

Jason turned to look at the heavy metal door.

“They’re out there,” he said, the joviality gone from his voice.

“So, what was that plan exactly?” Neil asked Jason.

“It’s basically the same as plan B,” Jason said. “Call it plan B plus.”

“There’s no way to portal out of here,” Clive said.

Cloud stuff flowed out of the amulet around Jason’s neck and took the shape of an archway.

“Jason, what are you doing?” Clive asked, his voice filled with unhappy suspicion.

“Clive and I have been working on a special project,” Jason said.

“A special project that doesn’t work,” Clive corrected.

“We have the basics down,” Jason said. “The problem is that it needs to use a cloud construct as a medium and we can’t figure out how to make that part work. The cloud flask is too complex for us to figure out how to reconfigure it.”

“Can’t you just dump the right stuff in and make it work?” Neil asked. “That’s how you normally add features, right?”

“We’ve done that as best we can,” Clive said, “but it’s only part of what we need. The problem is that we need to tap into core functions of how a cloud construct channels the energy by which it operates.”

“And you think you can solve that problem in the time it takes the evil zealots to break down that door?” Neil asked.

“No,” Jason said, “but there’s only one actual problem. To which there is, potentially, a makeshift solution.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Clive said angrily. “You’ll kill yourself twice over.”

“I still have no idea what either of you are talking about,” Neil said.

“We’ve been working on a way to boost Jason’s portal ability,” Clive said. “More range, more people. The idea is to use his cloud constructs as a medium to handle the extra power that would take, therefore preventing Jason from exploding in the attempt.”

“The problem we have,” Jason said, “is that it takes more power than I have to even try activating. Way, way more. As in, I could eat a gold spirit coin and we’re still falling short.”

“That’s why we need to modify the cloud flask,” Clive said. “So that cloud constructs make that specific power exchange more efficient. They have the capacity; we just need to define the right pathways. It’s theoretically easy since the cloud constructs are designed to be task-versatile. We even know more or less what we’re looking to do and only need to make it more efficient. We just don’t understand the construction of a cloud flask enough to do that. If we can, the efficiency will improve to the point that a gold-rank spirit coin, maybe even something less drastic, would be enough to boost Jason’s portals.”

“How does any of this help us right now?” Humphrey asked.

“If I’m following this right,” Neil said, “Jason can use his portable chunk of cloud construct to make this portal boost work, but he doesn’t have anywhere near the power. I think what Jason is talking about is using a diamond-rank coin to make up the difference.”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!” Humphrey roared. “I know your soul is strong, Jason, but that much power would kill you.”

“Yes, it would,” Clive agreed.

“I’m not talking about a diamond-rank coin,” Jason said. “I have something else. Something I can take only as much power from as I need.”

“Which will still be enough to kill you with power to spare,” Clive said. “You’ve worked through this right alongside me, Jason. You know how much power it will take. It wouldn’t be much different from using a diamond-rank coin.”

“What is this power source?” Neil asked.

Jason looked over at the civilians watching them with worried expressions.

“I’ll explain later,” he said. “Something people were fighting over on my world that should have been left alone.”

“No,” Humphrey said, no room for compromise in his voice. “Jason, this plan is out. Our chances aren’t what we’d like in this fight, but they aren’t so bad we’ll sacrifice you.”

“There are ways to keep me alive,” Jason said. “Clive and I have explored this.”

“Hypothetically,” Clive said. “And in every calculation we’ve made, your death came out more likely than your survival.”

“Those calculations weren’t wildly accurate.”

“You think that makes it better?”

Clive turned his head, his expression conflicted.

“Jason, you can’t let yourself die for the people in this room, and you know it. You have a larger responsibility.”

Jason narrowed his eyes at Clive.

“How much did Dawn tell you?” he asked.

“Everything,” Clive said. “She knows you, Jason. She knew that sooner or later, we’d be having a conversation like this. She needed someone to remind you that, like it or not, your life is more important than that of a couple of dozen people. If anything, the moral choice would be to use these people as a distraction that lets us escape. Or even just you. You told us what you came back to our world to do, but you left out the part about how important that specifically *you* are. About what happens to your world if you don’t survive to finish what you came here for.”

“There’s no way the World-Phoenix put all its eggs in my basket,” Jason said. “You know that. Dawn may not say it, but there’s some kind of backup plan in place.”

“You’re probably right,” Clive told him, “but what is the price of the second-best option, Jason?”

Jason’s expression grew dark. For a moment, something flashed in his eyes unlike anything the team had seen from him

before, but it passed in a fleeting moment.

“I’m not going to use these people as bait and run.”

“I know,” Clive said. “But staying and fighting has a better chance of your survival than definitely killing yourself to activate a half-finished project that may or may not even work.”

Jason bared his teeth but gave a capitulating nod. The archway of cloud-stuff dispersed into nothingness.

“Good,” Humphrey said. “We fight, then. Jason, how many of them are out there beyond the gold-rank converted?”

Jason closed his eyes and extended his senses, inching them forward as he pushed through the suppression.

“I can sense the gold-ranker. I think it’s using some kind of flame power on the door. There are other converted, but only a handful. Five... no, six essence users.”

The rest of the team shared a grim look. While Order of Redeeming Light members generally weren’t as good as guild-level adventurers, the leaders were and the rest were far from pushovers. On top of the gold-rank converted, it meant a desperate fight was waiting on the other side of the door.

“Wait,” Jason said. “Someone else is approaching.”

“Please tell me they’re Adventure Society reinforcements,” Neil said.

“No,” Jason said. “It’s another pair of essence users with a gold-rank converted.”

Jason opened his eyes and looked at the others.

“Damn you, Jason,” Humphrey said.

“At this point,” Jason said, “we try my plan or everyone dies.”

“Maybe we can use Sophie’s mother as a hostage,” Neil said. “It might work.”

“No,” Humphrey said. “It won’t.”

A SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT PARADIGM

JASON'S TEAM ALL LOOKED TO HIM WITH GRIM EXPRESSIONS.

“Maybe we don't have to be so drastic,” Neil suggested. “Instead of trying to portal all the way out, Jason opens one a couple of tunnels away and we leave nothing but an empty room for the enemy.”

“Is that viable, Jason?” Humphrey asked.

“Maybe,” he said. “If I force it. I can sense that the portal won't want to open.”

“Won't want to?” Humphrey asked.

“You've got a teleport power,” Jason said. “Have you used it, down here?”

“No,” Humphrey said. He'd been ignoring the option because it was much less intrinsic to his power set than Jason's shadow teleport, which he suddenly realised he hadn't seen Jason use since they left the dock. Jason's shadow-blending, unpredictable movement and ability to hide his aura made his conventional stealth tactics almost seem like shadow jumping, but Humphrey hadn't seen him use the real thing.

Humphrey concentrated on his own teleport power, not using it but running his mana through the pathways that would. He felt resistance, like trying to push through the webs of a monstrous spider, complete with an instinctual sense of danger.

“It doesn't... feel safe,” he said.

“That’s because it’s not,” Clive said. “Anchor points are critical in any form of dimensional translocation, from turning intangible to teleportation and portals.”

“As a naturally intangible entity,” Shade said, “I can confirm that employing physical force in this place feels difficult.”

“The deep granite here doesn’t just impede magical senses and portals,” Clive said. “It’s much more sophisticated than that, but those are the most prominent practical effects. More important than how it affects the range of portals is the way it makes potential destinations unviable.”

“That’s true,” Baseph said approaching from the group of gathered civilians. “Even very powerful essence users don’t portal deeper than the docks, even when they could.”

“That’s because portal destinations need to be magically sound,” Clive said. “The start point can be shakier because you’re there in person and your essence ability will use your own senses to autonomically adapt, unless it’s too unstable, in which case the portal won’t work. That threshold is much lower with the destination, but you can force things, such as by pushing in more power. Consuming a spirit coin, for example.”

“Let’s do that, then,” Neil said.

“No,” Clive said. “Portals normally won’t open to an unstable destination because portals are, by nature, very stable effects. Every instance of a portal mishap the Magic Society has on record is from someone using external aids, like a spirit coin, to open a portal in an unstable destination.”

“Isn’t that exactly the plan with this portal thing you and Jason have been working on?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Clive said. “Jason is talking about opening a portal beyond the reaches of this complex. The danger is to him. If he opens a portal to anywhere inside the complex, the danger is to every person who steps through it.”

“I don’t think we have a lot of time left to choose,” Neil said, pointing. The team turned to look at the door, which was

starting to faintly glow with heat.

Jason looked to Humphrey, whose face creased with anger.

“What if I ate a diamond-rank coin?” Humphrey asked. “That might be enough strength to let me kill the people outside.”

“That wouldn’t most likely kill you,” Clive said. “It would definitely kill you. Jason has more soul strength and his essence powers give him the ability to handle excess mana, which might—*might*—be enough that he doesn’t die if we work very, very hard. What that coin *would* most likely do is overload you with so much power that you’re crippled before you have a chance to face them. But I’m not telling you anything you don’t know.”

“Humphrey,” Jason said softly. “We don’t have time to clutch at any more straws than the one we’ve already got.”

Humphrey stormed away and lashed out with a kick that warped a metal table, wrenching it from the floor it was bolted to. It shot across the room, gouging the metal of the roof and a wall before thudding to the floor, no longer recognisable as furniture.

“That’s a yes,” Jason said and marched over to Melody, whipping her hood off and tossing it to Sophie. He yanked Melody to her feet, bringing them face to face. Jason had grown a little taller with rank-ups but was still not a large man and they were of roughly equal height.

“I told you that...” she said with a serpent’s smile before trailing off, unsettled by something in Jason’s alien eyes.

“There he is,” she said. “Nice to meet you, Mr Asano.”

“I’m going to open a portal,” he told her. “We can’t make you choose to go through, but you can choose to go.”

She looked at him with a curious expression.

“You can’t portal out of here. That’s impossible.”

“I’m going to do it anyway. Your choice is between going through the portal or us leaving your corpse behind when we do.”

“That, young master Geller,” she said, not taking her eyes from Jason, “is how to be intimidating. The resolve to follow through.”

Jason shoved Melody toward Sophie.

“Clive, prep the others,” he said.

As Jason once more made an archway out of cloud-stuff, Clive started briefing the others.

“Neil, Jason is going to be in a very bad way after he uses this power. His soul will be producing mana of a significantly greater concentration than his body can handle, like a tap that won’t shut off.”

“That will cause his body to break down,” Neil said. “That kind of damage is extremely resistant to healing.”

“Which is why you’ll need to do whatever you can for Jason. Baseph, we need this portal to be open for the smallest amount of time we can manage, so get your people organised into lines. They have to rush through as soon as it’s open. Shade, you already know what you and I have to do.”

“Yes,” Shade confirmed.

The cloud stuff archway Jason had formed shifted in colour from white to black, like ink spilling through milk. After it had turned entirely void black, blue and orange light started glowing from within. Jason held out one hand and the dark cloud-stuff solidified, turning into a marble-like substance. The archway remained empty, however, no portal opening.

With one hand still held out toward the archway, Jason used the other to take an item from his inventory. It looked like an ostrich egg made of gold, silver and blue transcendent light. To every aura sense in the room, it was a bottomless ocean of raw, unadulterated potential energy. Power incarnate, like the clay from which the universe was moulded.

“What is that?” Melody asked in a half-whisper. The only answer she received was a sharp smack on the back of the head from her daughter.

A line of darkness, dancing like black fire, appeared at the base of the arch. The shadowy flame turned silver and rose to fill the arch until the opening was full of silver light. The light shifted slowly to a mix of gold and silver, flecked with blue. Then the gold turned orange as the silver turned back into black and the blue expanded. The final result was a dark void in the archway containing a blue and orange cloud nebula.

As that was happening, Jason started shining with transcendent light. This immediately alarmed his companions as it looked as if he'd managed to load himself down with his own devastating holy afflictions.

“Go,” he said, his voice strained.

“Do you have a feel for how many people get through before it collapses?” Clive asked.

“GO!”

The single word Jason roared was less a human sound than the bellow of ship's horn, reverberating with an aura so powerful and unrestrained that some of the iron-rank civilians started screaming with terror, fear and pain.

Clive braced his shoulders, glanced over the others and then went through. Sophie shoved her mother up to the portal.

“Choice time.”

Melody didn't respond or hesitate, moving straight through the portal. Sophie was only surprised for a moment before following her through.

Clive was used to the slight disorientation of portal travel, but what he experienced when emerging from Jason's special portal was on another level. He staggered away from the arch as Melody followed through, quickly followed by Sophie. Melody fell over while Sophie stood in place, swaying for a moment before grabbing Melody and dragging her out of the way.

Civilians spilled through, stumbling and falling to the ground. With a grunt, Clive moved to pull them out of the way to make room for those that followed, Sophie doing the same. Many were violently ill, although any mess that splashed to the floor was neatly drained away into the dark cloud material that made it up.

They were in a large room in the cloud house that was actively changing around them. The white cloud-stuff was turning dark, plain black. The furniture in the room sank into the floor as the walls expanded outward. The ceiling pulled away, opening the room up to the sky.

Neil and Baseph came through in the middle of the civilians. Neil recovered quickly and started helping people; Baseph took longer to recover before doing the same. The civilians weren't doing well, especially the low-rankers. Some of the iron-rankers went into seizures from the effects of the modified portal.

The aura beating down on them didn't help anyone, pulsing like the heartbeat of a giant beast. The cloud house was in no way hiding its nature as a spirit domain with an all-encompassing version of Jason's aura crushing down on everyone inside, tyrannical and utterly unyielding. The only grace was that it was not currently hostile, even to Melody, who crawled into a corner, momentarily forgotten.

After the last of the civilians were through, Humphrey and Belinda came through, at an angle to fit through the arch as they supported Jason between them. They each had an arm slung under one of his, while the reality core rested lightly in his hands. Jason was incandescent with transcendent light, glowing brighter than the egg-shaped core he was holding.

Belinda and Humphrey staggered but powered on, carrying Jason forward. Clive jumped in front of Jason, who was almost too bright to look at. Semi-conscious at best, his head lolled to the side.

“Jason!” Clive yelled at him. “You can stop!”

Clive grabbed Jason's head between his hands.

“SHUT DOWN THE PORTAL!”

Jason looked at Clive with bleary, confused eyes. Clive yanked the reality core from Jason’s hands, tossing it away. The transcendent light filling the portal sputtered out and the marble-like stone turned back into cloud-stuff, then was absorbed into the floor. Jason had barely been supporting himself at that point and he stopped trying, only Humphrey and Belinda holding him upright.

Jason regained his own feet, shrugging the pair off and holding out his hand, unsteady but determined. He opened a portal to his spirit realm, hoping it could siphon the excess energy from his body. He stumbled toward the archway, only for the power within his body to react violently. The archway collapsed and Jason was thrown violently back as a bright flash flared between them. The soft wall cushioned Jason’s impact and Humphrey rushed to catch him before he fell.

Baseph and Sophie were already clearing the room, shoving civilians out a door. Neil was looking to the ones who had seizures.

“Look after the civilians,” Clive said to Neil. “We have a short window before the mana starts eating Jason away, so use it to help them and then come back.”

Neil nodded and crouched down over the pair having seizures.

“Help me get them out of the building,” he said to Baseph. “This aura isn’t doing them any favours.”

“What is this place?” Baseph asked.

“Work today, questions tomorrow.”

Clive helped Humphrey and Belinda lay Jason carefully down in the middle of the room. Shade’s bodies swept out of Jason’s shadow in a crowd, surrounding him. The closest ones reached out to touch him while others touched them, expanding out like a spider’s web as they started collectively draining mana out of Jason. Clive stood over Jason and also started draining his mana with a spell.

Ability: [Eldritch Imbalance] (Balance)

- Spell (drain, magic, channel).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None (channel).
-
- Current rank: Silver 3 (19%).
-
- Effect (iron): Drain mana from the target for as long as the spell is channelled. Level of drain scales higher based on the target's current mana relative to their maximum mana.
-
- Effect (bronze): While being channelled, periodically inflicts [Mana Imbalance] on enemies with less mana than the caster.
-
- Effect (silver): Gain an alternate version of the spell that is instantaneous instead of channelled and inflicts a small amount of withering damage instead of draining mana. This is an execute ability, but the damage escalation scales with low mana instead of low health.

- [Mana Imbalance] (affliction, magic, stacking): Mana drain abilities have an increased effect on the target. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Normally, when Clive used his mana drain spell, the rank of the target was irrelevant. Whatever grade of mana came from them, the spell refined or, in the case of higher-rank targets, diluted it into mana appropriate to Clive's rank. When he drained mana from Jason, however, it was like injecting lava. He screamed as the mana entered his body, breaking the channelling effect.

The stream of mana that had briefly passed from Jason to Clive had not been the usual blue, but a bright silver-blue. The same mana was leaking from Jason on its own, passing through his skin like sweat, along with blood. Jason's white suit dissolved in patches, the fabric around the holes staining with blood. Clive noted that the cloud house appeared to be leaching the aggressive foreign mana from Jason. They had hoped it would when postulating ways to increase Jason's survivability, but anything to do with his spirit domain was guesswork.

Clive glanced at the Shade bodies spread around Jason, who had formed some kind of circuit, draining mana from Jason and passing it through themselves like a network. Clive could actually see the mana pass through them like a bucket chain, being diluted as it spread amongst all the bodies. Steeling himself, Clive channelled his spell again, gritting his teeth as Jason's enhanced mana passed into his body.

Humphrey, Sophie and Belinda were still evacuating civilians from the room. The higher-ranked bronze and the two silvers were the last of the civilians left, due to better enduring the tyrannical aura flooding the room. Sitting on the floor where he had waited to recover from passing through the portal, one

of the silver-rankers spotted the glowing ostrich egg of the reality core. Thinking about his personal storage power, he looked around and saw everyone's attention on either Jason or the exit. He slowly and casually shuffled towards the reality core until a massive sword, shaped like a dragon wing, was conjured in front of his face.

“Rethink that move, friend.”

With the pervasive aura of the spirit domain, he hadn't noticed Humphrey's approach. He looked up and nodded eagerly.

“Time to go,” Humphrey said coldly.

Getting up, the man followed Humphrey and the last of the other civilians out.

After quickly assessing that none of the civilians would die from the savage portal crossing, Neil dashed back into the cloud house. The outside he left to Taika, Travis and Gary, who had been in the cloud house when the team portalled in. They had come running with the changes to the house and been immediately tasked by Humphrey with civilian-wrangling.

Even the exterior of the cloud house had transformed into the same black cloud stuff, the ordinary building façade completely gone. The house was going through changes that Neil was fairly sure were more extreme than they should be without the house being returned to the flask for redeployment. He ignored the errant thought as he raced back inside.

Reaching what was now a large open platform at the top of the house, he moved through the swarm of Shades crowding Jason. Sparks zapped him as he passed through, like pumped-up static electricity. The Shades were turning the wrong colour, a silver-blue staining their normal uniform black.

Neil found Clive draining bright blue mana from Jason in a stream as thick as one of Humphrey's thighs. Jason was still glowing bright, but the light dimmed slightly every so often, as if the mana inside him were breathing. Neil crouched down next to where Jason lay.

Aside from the blood and mana seeping through his skin, Jason looked fairly intact, if delirious. His head moved from side to side as if he were confused and looking for something, but his eyes were closed, although light shone through the eyelids. Neil's perception ability, Eyes of Opportunity, allowed him to see the vulnerabilities of people. Because of this, he understood that Jason was in a far more fragile state than he appeared.

The underlying framework of any entity existing in physical reality was its magical matrix. This was true even for intangible entities like Shade, with no physical body. Neil could see that the overcharged mana Jason's soul was dumping into the magical matrix of his body was breaking it down on a fundamental level. If not for Jason's formidable soul strength regulating the release of mana at least a little, his magical matrix would have broken down already.

Unfortunately, there was little Neil could do about Jason's condition. Repairing the body as it started to break down would marginally delay the collapse of the magical matrix by maintaining the platform in which it resided, but the impact would be limited. Neil immediately saw that Shade and Clive pulling the mana from Jason was far more effective than anything Neil could do.

Instead, he turned his attention to Shade and Clive. The mana they were both taking in was likewise negatively impacting them, although not so drastically as the power that left Jason helpless on the floor. Shade appeared to be spreading the mana across his bodies to minimise the degradation of his magical matrix and was, for the moment, alright. Clive, on the other hand, was building up dangerous levels of the caustic mana.

An unexpected effect of Clive's drain spell was how quickly it pulled mana from Jason. The strength of the drain effect was predicated on how much of their maximum mana pool the target currently had filled. Jason was stuffed with well beyond his baseline limit and almost certainly would be dead if his own powers didn't allow him to do something similar. As a result of this mana level, Clive was pulling more mana out of Jason than he thought the spell was even capable of. Clive's maximum mana pool was far greater than an average essence user of his rank, but he quickly found himself with a full tank.

Clive stopped channelling the mana drain spell and started collecting the massive power currently burning his insides. He raised his hand to the sky, tilting his head back as he gathered the mana searing through him in preparation for launching another spell.

Neil recognised what Clive was about to do.

“Want a boost?”

“No,” Clive said. “I need to spend the mana.”

“Right,” Neil said, nodding. His bolster spell would up the power and reduce the cost of an ally's ability. What Clive needed now was to purge all the mana he could.

Clive's Wrath of the Magister spell was the most powerful instantaneous damage spell the team had access to. It was also the most mana-hungry by far, becoming more powerful the more mana Clive pumped into it. As the mana poured out of him and he chanted the incantation, he silently promised never to complain about the spell's mana-devouring nature again.

“Feel the power of reality remade.”

Clive had never unleashed such a powerful variant of the spell before. Not only was it the most mana he had ever pumped into it, but that mana was supercharged. The result was a rainbow sky beam that quickly grew to almost the width of the room as it shot into the sky.

After a brief, staggered moment, Clive went back to draining mana.

Neil tossed a healing bolt at Clive, the green energy helping Clive's body bear the strain of the mana coursing through it. It would have been water off a duck's back to Jason, but Clive wasn't in such a drastic state, so Neil dedicated his efforts where they were of actual use.

"How's he doing?" Clive asked as he drained mana.

"Not good," Neil said bitterly. "There's only one thing I can do for him, but I need to hold off as long as I can or it might kill him."

"What's that?" Clive asked.

"My Hero's Moment spell," Neil told him.

"That's good thinking," Clive said. "It offers a big boost to maximum mana that will really help him."

They both understood the ability, so neither gave voice to the danger. Once the spell ended, the subject's maximum mana was temporarily reduced to below its starting value. If Jason was still being flooded with overcharged mana at that point, it would definitely kill him.

"Last minute," Clive said.

"Yeah," Neil said grimly.

Humphrey, Sophie and Belinda watched as Clive, Neil and Shade worked to save Jason. An hour after their arrival, they were still desperately struggling to keep Jason alive. Between Jason's spirit domain leaching mana out of him and Clive and Shade doing the same, the light shining inside Jason was noticeably subdued, but it was not diminishing as swiftly as it needed to. The degradation of Jason's body's magical matrix

was starting to show; he now looked like he was in the final stages of starvation. Neil healed him as best he could, but it was rubbing ointment on the burns of a man still on fire.

Clive was strained, but by purging his mana each time his big spell came off cooldown, he was in a stable loop of draining Jason and disposing of the mana without overtaxing his own body too badly.

Shade was a different story. While his array of bodies gave him a higher overall mana capacity than Clive, he had no effective purging mechanism. The first time it reached a critical point, mana flowed from all the bodies to collect in one at the edges of the web, close to the door. It dashed out of the room and, moments later, an explosion rocked the cloud house.

Expending the body hadn't been enough to completely clear out the mana from the others, but it had bought time and there were more bodies to spare. However, with each body that he dumped mana into and sent off to detonate, Shade's overall mana capacity dropped.

Neil had tried bringing Jason to his senses. If Jason had been conscious, he could possibly have used the mana collecting inside him to replenish Shade's bodies, which would both help Shade's efforts and serve as a useful mana sump. Unfortunately, none of Neil's techniques had managed to rouse him and he feared that pushing harder would just make things worse.

"I feel so useless," he lamented.

Clive said nothing, only glancing at the rest of the team, standing helpless at the edge of the room.

"I know," Neil growled. "But I'm the healer. Keeping everyone alive is the first thing I have to do. The first."

He examined Jason's body again, seeing that it was a wreck. It no longer had the physical integrity of a silver-ranker and barely that of a bronze.

"Neil," Shade said, grabbing Neil's attention. Shade never used his first name.

“Something is about to happen,” Shade told him. “Gordon is going to need your assistance.”

“How so?”

“You will need to point out the worst-affected parts of Mr Asano’s body. Only you can see the underlying pattern.”

“What then?” Neil asked.

“Then you will need to refrain from intervening, regardless of what happens,” Shade said. “This is true for everyone in this room.”

Sophie looked over at her mother in the corner, then went over, hood in hand.

“Let me watch,” Melody asked, her face holding an uncharacteristic sincerity. Sophie didn’t buy it.

“If you find a way to interfere,” Sophie told her, “you are not going to live a very long time.”

Sophie pulled the hood over her mother’s head.

Gordon manifested in the air above Jason.

“The most damaged parts of his body, Mr Davone,” Shade said to Neil.

“The extremities,” Neil said. “Any of them. Anything from the knees and elbows down is close to ruined, and the upper limbs aren’t much better.”

None of Jason’s body looked healthy as he became more and more withered and skeletal. To Neil’s eyes, however, it was even worse. Fundamental damage to the magical matrix of a body could be repaired so long as the soul was intact and the body was alive. It was an intensive and laborious process, however. Compared to the ease with which magic could mend flesh and bones, it was an excruciating slog for healer and healed alike.

Jason's companions watched his familiar float above him, surrounded by six orbiting eyes. The team all jumped when beams shot from the orbs and started cutting through Jason's weakened flesh. Humphrey and Sophie took a step forward and Neil started, still crouched next to Jason. Clive was startled enough that it interrupted his channelling spell.

All four were startled again as they heard Shade's voice raised to a shout.

“DO NOT INTERVENE!”

Gordon cut away Jason's limbs just below the shoulder and hips, his force beams easily disintegrating the weakened flesh and bone. Blood did not spill from the cut stumps. Instead, leeches swarmed out, tightly packing themselves into the form of new limbs, melting together into new, healthy flesh.

The dismembered parts of Jason's body broke down to goo within moments of being severed, dissolving into rainbow smoke. Neil looked once more at Jason's body matrix and saw the newly grown limbs had actually restored Jason's matrix in those areas, making Neil wonder how that was even possible, his mind racing.

“What's happening?” Humphrey asked, his voice heavy with threat.

“Oh, damn,” Neil said as realisation struck. “Jason's leech familiar is connected to him on a deep soul level. Unlike external magic from any healer—or even most of Jason's own abilities—Colin can replace not just the flesh but the underlying magical matrix. Only when he's replacing wholesale, though, not through the normal regeneration. But it means that Colin can restore Jason in ways that healing magic can't. Very few abilities can heal on that level, and they're almost always self-healing, like your Immortality power, Humphrey. The only external things I know of that do it are miracle potions and very high-rank healing powers. The powers that don't resurrect anymore can now heal on a body-matrix level instead. It's what the Healer gave them to compensate for what Death took away.”

Neil was interrupted by another Shade body leaving to rock the room with an explosion. With half of the bodies gone, the rate at which they were being expended was accelerating.

“Does this mean Colin can keep Jason alive until we’re done?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Neil said, looking over Jason’s body again. “Gordon, don’t cut off anything but his limbs. I know he’s a tough bastard, but he isn’t at his best right now. If you start digging into his torso, it’ll probably kill him before Colin can replace the flesh.”

“Meaning?” Humphrey asked.

“Colin buys us time because the extremities degrade faster than the central mass, but it’s still an uncertainty. Clive, you can start draining again.”

Clive’s mana drain was harsher than Shade’s and he had held off while Colin was regrowing the limbs. He nodded and cast his mana drain spell.

“The problem is the head,” Neil said. “Normally, that wouldn’t be so bad because Jason’s body hasn’t had a brain for a while. It figures that he’s unconscious for such a prime joke opportunity. Jason’s head is degrading faster than his torso, but he’s fragile enough that cutting it off and growing a new one would kill him.”

“Wouldn’t decapitation kill him anyway?” Clive asked.

“At full strength, Jason could probably survive because of Colin. The rest of us would need some very good, very powerful and very quick healing magic.”

Another Shade body left, rocking the room with the now-familiar explosion.

“My ability to continue draining Mr Asano is swiftly reaching its limit,” Shade said. He only had three bodies remaining, all of which were almost entirely blue-white instead of black.

Two of them dimmed, but only slightly as the third turned blue and rushed away.

The rest of the team now had room to crowd around Jason. They looked on seeing the glow inside him had dimmed considerably. Neil, who saw deeper, shook his head.

“It’s too soon,” he said. “If I use my spell on Jason now, it won’t last long enough.”

Clive stopped to cast another sky beam.

“Options?” he asked, after resuming his drain spell. “I’m all out.”

Neil tossed another life bolt into Clive’s overworked body.

“Me too,” he said.

“Colin is at his limit of regenerating Mr Asano,” Shade said. “His biomass is almost entirely expended.”

Neil examined Jason’s body yet again, seeing that if he waited any longer, the spell would probably kill Jason itself.

“If it wakes him up,” Neil said, “It might let him burn off some mana remaking Shade bodies.”

First, Neil used his Bolster ability to enhance the next power he used. He followed that up by chanting the incantation for Hero’s Moment.

“Now is the moment to seize the reins of fate.”

The team felt Neil’s magic infuse Jason’s body. It had numerous effects to enhance him, but it was the expanded mana capacity that would hopefully keep him alive. The time it took for the mana flowing from his soul at a slowly decreasing rate to reach the new limit gave Jason’s body a reprieve. They saw him relax. Unfortunately, he did not wake.

“Neil, could you try forcing him awake again?” Clive asked.

“No,” Neil said. “It’d kill him.”

“Then what do we do?” Sophie asked.

“We hope the spell lasts long enough,” Neil said, knowing that it wouldn’t.

Gordon had retreated into Jason after amputating Jason’s limbs, but he appeared once more, this time floating around, moving back and forth in front of the team.

“He wants us to back off,” Shade said. “All of us.”

“I can’t stop draining.”

“It’s not enough, Clive,” Neil said as he stood up. “If Gordon has any idea at all, we have to go with it; it doesn’t really matter what it is. Something is better than nothing, and I’ve got nothing. How about you?”

Neil and Clive shared a look and Clive stopped channelling his spell. They backed away with the rest of the team, including the two remaining Shade bodies.

“What is Gordon doing?” Humphrey asked.

“I genuinely have no idea,” Shade said.

They all watched Gordon, hovering motionless over Jason. After a moment, he slowly floated upward as the eye orbs started rotating around him at a rapidly increasing pace. Suddenly, all six blasted out beams in staccato bursts, not at Jason but around him. Where the beams struck the floor of the cloud platform, they left behind lines and sigils of blue and orange light.

“It’s like your ability, Clive,” Humphrey said. “He’s drawing a ritual diagram.”

“Did you know he could do that?” Clive asked Shade.

“I did not, Mr Standish.”

“What’s he trying to do?” Neil asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Clive said, peering at the diagram.

“It’s really not,” Neil said.

“Definitely not,” Sophie agreed.

“That was an absurd thing to say,” Humphrey said.

They looked on as Gordon worked, lapsing into silence. Belinda worriedly nestled up against Humphrey and he gently stroked her hair. Sophie gave them a brief side-glance but said nothing. Gordon's eyes all fired simultaneously, with absolute speed and precision.

"I think it's some kind of aura projection ritual," Clive said. "I think. It's working off principles I've never seen. It's almost a different paradigm of magic altogether."

"What does that mean?" Neil asked.

"If you think of the way we use magic as a language, what Gordon is doing is in a whole other language. It's a different system of magic."

"I didn't know there were different systems of magic."

"There aren't," Clive said. "What he's doing shouldn't work. It's like trying to chill a drink by putting it outside because you're expecting the sun to make things colder. It's just not how the world works. What he's doing shouldn't do anything."

Gordon stopped working and everyone waited, but nothing happened.

"See?" Clive said. Then Gordon vanished, disappearing back into Jason's aura.

"Is that it?" Neil asked.

"Is Clive meant to conduct the ritual?" Sophie asked.

"I can't," Clive said. "As I said, that's not how magic works."

"Can't you try?" Humphrey asked. "Something has to change."

"What you're asking for is the equivalent to walking through a picture of a tunnel. It may look like the real things, but that's not how reality works."

They didn't move closer, wary of stepping into the intricate ritual circle that occupied the bulk of the room with glowing lines and sigils of blue and orange, even though it

seemed to be doing nothing. As they looked on, unsure of what to do next, an eye orb appeared above Jason.

When Gordon was not manifested, Jason could use up to two of his orbs. A second one appeared over Jason, then a third, fourth, fifth and sixth in increasingly rapid succession. They circled over Jason and the overcharged mana seeped from his body to be absorbed by the orbs. The whole team's gaze was locked on them as they absorbed more and more mana. Each time they did, different sections of the glowing ritual circle glowed brighter.

"Did you know he could do that?" Clive asked Shade again.

"I don't know what he's doing now, Mr Standish."

"You should maybe have a little talk with your fellow familiar," Clive said.

"He's not traditionally talkative."

As more and more of the ritual circle lit up, the enormous nebula eye that Jason's spirit domain could call up manifested over the platform.

"Jason said that was some kind of defensive weapon, right?" Neil asked. "Maybe it's going to burn off the mana with some kind of death beam."

Clive tilted his head back and forth, his face conflicted. He stopped as he made up his mind.

"Neil, boost me," he said.

"Are you sure?" Neil asked.

"I'm sure."

"You said you don't know what that ritual is."

"Doesn't matter. As you said, it's something and we've got nothing, so let's push it all the way."

"What are you talking about?" Humphrey asked.

"Doing something that's probably stupid," Clive said, "but it's that kind of day. Jason would do it."

“Which is how we got here!” Humphrey exclaimed.

“Do it,” Sophie said.

Neil used Bolster on Clive to boost his next power. Clive held his arms out in front of him and his life force started emerging from his body, shrouding him in a vibrant red glow, streaked with silver-blue. With a pushing motion using both hands, a stream of life force moved like a smoke trail, out of Clive and into the ritual.

Ability: [Blood Magic] (Balance)

- Special ability (sacrifice).
 - Cost: Variable health.
 - Cooldown: None (channel).
-
- Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).
-
- Effect (iron): Consume your own life force to gain mana.
-
- Effect (bronze): Expend your life force to enhance the power of rituals and essence abilities employing rituals. Amount of life force required varies by ritual. Utilising life force other than your own for this effect leaves a mark on your soul that can be detected with sufficiently rigorous examination.

- Effect (silver): Expend your own life force to enhance the effect of spells.

As soon as the trail of life force came into contact with the ritual circle, the trail grew thicker and the ritual drank it in, absorbing more life force. It especially devoured the silver and blue streaks coursing through Clive's life force, which brought him some relief. It was the overcharged mana Clive hadn't purged and he was happy to lose it. A lot of life force went with it, though, causing Clive to stagger heavily.

"Cut it off if it needs more than you've got," Neil warned him as life force continued to drain out. Neil used a life bolt to replenish Clive's dwindling life force.

"Obviously."

The eye orbs continued absorbing mana from Jason and life force from Clive, Neil healing Clive regularly to compensate. Finally, every part of the ritual diagram was shining more brightly than it had when Gordon drew it. The orbs then moved to various points around the ritual circle, sinking into the floor. In the air above them, the great eye started to grow and change.

It was hard to see what was happening from directly underneath. The eye rapidly became a field of shadows, through which dark shapes moved like fish in a pond. It was vast, at least a kilometre across and just as high. In the centre of the field, an empty, hooded cloak appeared, darker than the shadows around it but limned with light and speckled with stars. Inside the cloak was a bright sky, like the one the field had displaced.

The aura of Jason's spirit domain rushed out like a tsunami.

The Rimaros royal palace was on a sky island floating above Livaros, one hundred and twenty kilometres away from Jason's cloud house on Arnote. Soramir Rimaros was being briefed by Trenchant Moore on the latest information coming from the mining complex rescue operation when he turned his head in the exact direction of Arnote, his eyes going wide.

“What the fuck?”

Trenchant Moore dropped his clipboard, startled at the diamond-ranker's exclamation.

SOMETHING DRASTIC

SLIPPING BELINDA INTO THE RANKS OF THE ORDER OF Redeeming Light had been startlingly easy. The order had not anticipated the Adventure Society sending a response to the mining complex so quickly and their teams had been caught by surprise. A number of the teams had scattered after coming out of the wrong side of skirmishes, sacrificing the pure converted to cover their escape.

Jason and his team had encountered a pair of such order members early in their descent into the facility. They had eliminated both, but Shade identified one of the pair as an ideal identity for Belinda to assume. Having infiltrated their headquarters himself, he was familiar with their personnel to varying degrees through his diligent gathering of information.

His information on the leadership was as limited as his access to them had been. They had spent most of their time in the more secure areas of the facility and Shade hadn't been willing to risk attempting to infiltrate them. He had also mostly avoided Melody's own team, even those not in leadership positions. Shade was quite wary of one member of her team, Kelleigh.

The people he had been able to gain an ample sense of were the rank and file of the other teams. Normally, the order's various cells were kept apart, but the entire order was laying low after the Builder island raid. Since then, they had been hidden in the order's largest secret stronghold, carved from the inside of a mountain and only accessible from underwater.

With them all sequestered together, Shade had the opportunity to get a thorough sense of them.

The member of the order that Shade identified as ideal for Belinda to replace was a good choice for several reasons. One was that she had been separated from the order in the upper levels, making it easier for them to regroup when the order made for the exit. Much more important was the nature of the member in question, whose name was Keth Gino.

One of the things Shade had noted about order members was that whatever process the flames of purification entailed, it had varying effects on physiology and mentality from person to person. Melody, for example, had undergone significant physical changes in going from a celestine to a human. The most visible changes were her hair and eyes, once metallic silver like her daughter's. Melody's hair had turned a milky white, while her eyes had turned grey.

On the other hand, Shade suspected that Melody's strong personality and sharp mind were largely unchanged from before the process, with only her core motivations shifting. Compared to that, many members of the order were impacted mentally to a large degree. Even staying just a few days with the order was enough for that to be clear to Shade.

On one end of the mentally impacted scale were Melody, the other leaders and some members like Rhett, Jaime and Kelleigh, who retained their full faculties. Others ranged from rigid-thinkers lacking in creativity, which could just be natural, to almost drone-like. All of the Builder's converted were hard set at the drone end of the spectrum, while the EOA converted from Earth were more like the order in that the results varied wildly.

Keth Gino was deep on the drone end of the mentality scale. She showed zero initiative, followed orders and only spoke when spoken to, if then. What made her especially valuable was that she was often found wandering aimlessly, like a sleepwalker with no purpose. She was one of several of them who displayed a mentality very similar to the pure converted who were turned using purified clockwork cores.

The lack of personality and initiative, along with a proclivity for wandering, made Keth Gino the perfect role for Belinda to inhabit. She could keep her mouth shut, her ears open and not be expected to know any information that Shade wouldn't be able to supply. If she was found wandering around the enemy stronghold, she would just be overlooked.

Belinda had shape-shifted into Keth, with one of Shade's bodies hidden in her shadow to provide guidance. She separated from the party, her place on the team taken by Stash. It was a most-likely unnecessary precaution, but as they already knew there were traitors amongst the adventurers, it was best to be careful.

When a pair of also-scattered members of the order encountered Belinda wandering alone, they had her trail along like a lost sibling they had found. The order regrouped and made their way to the dock, where the traitorous team of adventurers left to guard the dock helped them. They did not wait long for more order members to make it back to the dock before taking all the vessels in the dock and departing.

Most of the groups managed to make it, either collectively or as stragglers came in, and they did not wait long before making their escape. Belinda got the feeling that the leaders who had been at the dock were as much worried about Melody returning to the dock as more adventurers. The unfortunate intervention of the adventurers was more than enough excuse to leave her to them.

Belinda kept her face and aura blank of emotion, which was the best part of taking on the role of Keth. The drone woman was an emotional blank slate, much easier to replicate than a complex person. The hardest part was standing by as the order killed a couple of civilians who made trouble. Belinda was unsure if she could have kept up the emotionless ruse if she'd been ordered to kill innocent people. She'd have done it, or it would have been her head, but she was not sure she could hide her emotions while doing so.

Belinda had been treated like the handful of pure converted not sacrificed by the order members and she was shuffled onto one of the transports. That had been the true point of no return.

She was sealed inside, with no way of communicating or even knowing where the transport was taking them. While her assumed identity made eavesdropping easy, it was out of character to ask questions herself.

The sense of oppressive isolation didn't change when they arrived at the mountain stronghold. The magical defences that blocked senses in both directions made her feel boxed in.

The order was a mess in the wake of their disastrous expedition, although the two leaders who had made it out, Marika and Elise, seemed satisfied. The combination of a stolen resource transport filled with materials and the absence of Melody seemed to make them both happy. She could tell they were already eyeing each other off over who would end up in charge; a leadership conflict was an asset she could potentially make use of.

Belinda wandered off in the chaos to Keth's designated dormitory, where she could pause and take stock without coming across as suspicious. Most of the order members remained at the stronghold submarine dock, still reeling from the generally disastrous result of the mining complex raid.

"Should we try and act now while everything is in chaos?" Belinda asked. "This might be our best chance to poke around places maybe we shouldn't without being noticed."

"No," Shade told her. "The blank-minded order members prone to wandering always do so when things are calmer, often while the others are sleeping. When things are raucous, they tend to go to their dormitories and stay out of the way. They've been trained to do that by the others."

"Like a pet put in its box so it doesn't get underfoot," Belinda observed.

"Just so. Patience will serve us well here and..."

"Shade?"

"I think something may have happened to Mr Asano," he said. "Something drastic."

"I didn't think you could sense your other bodies or Jason from here," Belinda said.

“I cannot,” Shade confirmed. “Beyond a base sense that the connection is there, no information should be able to pass through it. The fact that any sensation at all made it through suggests that Mr Asano’s circumstances, whatever they might be, are quite extraordinary.”

Intellectually, Liara Rimaros understood why she had been explicitly instructed not to personally participate in the rescue operation in the mining complex. Her abilities were ill-suited to the task and her emotional investment would not be an asset. Gold-rankers were not accustomed to being told no, even by the director of the Adventure Society, which was why he had recruited the diamond-rank Zila Rimaros to tell her no for him. It was the kind of option only the monster surge made possible and he was grateful for it.

Liara was assuaged by managing the operation from the Rimaros side. Officially, she had been using the team that had been guarding the dock for communication. One of their members, like Jason, had a multi-body familiar that could be used to communicate over vast distances. This was the excuse Liara had used to specifically assign the traitorous team to guard the docks, giving the Order of Redeeming Light a pathway to escape.

Keeping an eye on discovered traitors rather than exposing them was a favourite strategy of Liara’s. It did take care to manage, especially with multiple groups on the go, but the payoff when using those assets effectively was immense. It had allowed her to capture her first Order of Redeeming Light prisoners, even if she had admittedly been hunting for Builder cultists, by leaking information about Jason Asano.

In this instance, it would hopefully allow the Adventure Society to strike a definitive blow to the order, at least for their operation in the Sea of Storms. Belinda had undertaken a huge risk in attempting to infiltrate the enemy base, and had been preparing should an opportunity arise. Her team had enthusiastically encouraged her to back out of the plan, and

while Liara had done the same, she was confident her lack of sincerity had been seen through.

The presence of Shade bodies in the mining complex dock and Liara's own shadow had allowed her to keep tabs on events and see exactly what the traitors were telling her, versus what was actually happening. The traitors were away, Belinda with them and apparently undetected, although Liara, of all people, knew it could be part of a deeper game.

Once the traitors were gone, Shade approached Korinne Pescos so that Liara could communicate with her directly and better manage events remotely. The arrival of the gold-rankers was a relief, but she still awaited word of her husband. The news that the facility had been sabotaged was a mixed blessing, as it complicated the operation but suggested Baseph was still alive. She was confident that if the sabotage was successfully enacted, he would be the one behind it. Probably complaining the whole time about safety features that he himself introduced.

"Princess Liara," Shade said, his voice measured and calm as ever. "I would appreciate the immediate dispatch of a healer who can repair damage on the core matrix level and the strongest mana-drainer you have to Mr Asano's cloud house."

"What happened?"

"Mr Asano managed to extract his team, your husband and a large number of civilians via portal, but the after-effects of having done so are destroying him."

"How is that... never mind, that can wait. RODNEY!"

Liara managed to restrain her instincts and not immediately rush to the cloud house with the gold-rankers she recruited. Instead, she continued managing the mining complex evacuation until another Adventure Society official took over. She only stayed long enough to introduce Shade to her as their communication node before rushing outside.

Her assistant had readied a gold-rank flying device, the princess certainly having a flying device permit for Livaros. It was a small, long sky-skimmer of the type Jason likened to *Star Wars* speeder bikes. She shot over the distance between Livaros and Arnote, warning off monsters attracted by the speed with aura blasts filled with her pent-up, frustrated rage.

It was not hard to pick out the picturesque town on the shores of the lagoon from the air, but that was wholly unnecessary. She spotted the periodic rainbow sky beams well before she reached the island. She spotted a crowd gathered around Asano's cloud house, which had been replaced with some manner of black temple. Blue and orange lights shone from a ritual being performed on an open roof platform.

Liara ignored propriety and sent her aura to sweep over the crowd, although it stopped dead the moment it reached any part of the black temple. To her surprise, the gold-rankers she had sent were outside, but their auras were not what she was searching for. She sensed her husband, exhausted and radiating guilt, but healthy. She didn't bother to slow down, leaping from the skimmer at full speed. The skimmer crashed into and through the invisible barrier at the cliff's edge while she crashed into Baseph.

RIDICULOUS NEW SOUL POWER

LIARA'S MARRIAGE HAD NEVER BEEN ONE OF GREAT PASSION. A political arrangement made when she and Baseph were young, their relationship had nonetheless grown over the decades. Friends and often lovers, their true shared love was their children, now grown. Only one of their children was local, having followed his father into the administration of the Amouz family interests. The others were further afield, having followed their mother into the adventuring life.

"Did you let Joseph know I was fine?" Baseph asked Liara after assuring her yet again that he was tired but unharmed.

"*I didn't know you were fine,*" she said. "I rushed here as soon as I could get away. I've been running your rescue operation, although Jason Asano seems to have gone rather drastically off-plan."

Baseph frowned and Liara followed his gaze past the crowd gathered on the lawn to the former cloud house. It was now obviously made from cloud-stuff, but rather than fluffy white, it was an ominous black, like storm clouds conjured by an evil god. The shape was no longer that of a house either, but built more like a temple. It was not the look of an ordinary temple, though. It seemed like an evil temple from a children's story, all looming walls and pointed spires. Liara had seen the open ritual platform at the top.

The temple had a wide arch in which three people were standing, the only ones setting foot in the temple itself. Liara recognised them all, having kept a tight watch on Jason, his team and the people he came into contact with. Gareth Xandier

was a huge leonid, while Taika Williams was a chocolate-skinned human-turned-outworlder who was possibly even larger. Next to the others, the regular-sized Travis Noble, another human-outworlder, looked downright diminutive.

The rest of the people gathered in front of the building were a mix of shaken-looking civilians, townsfolk and people who had arrived in response to events going on. This included Pelli, the town mayor and distant branch member of the royal family. She was one of three gold-rankers, the others being the people she had sent herself. The gold-rankers were standing in front of the archway leading into the temple.

“Why aren’t they going in?” Liara asked Baseph.

“The building won’t let them,” Baseph said. “Aside from Asano’s friends, anyone who goes in has their flesh start to rot and their aura brutally suppressed. It was even affecting the civilians who were the last to come out, so it’s lucky we got the iron-rankers out first. If it affects the gold-rankers, any irons still in there would have died fast.”

“You?” Liara asked him, but he shook his head.

“I got out early, to organise the rest.”

“What is Asano doing?” Liara asked.

“He’s dying, Lee. I didn’t really follow the conversation, but whatever he did to get us out, his team only went along with it when there was no other choice. They were fairly certain it would kill him.”

No aura whatsoever was emanating from the temple, which was an unnervingly blank spot in Liara’s magical senses.

“No one can get in?”

“Anyone can get in. Surviving it is the problem. The gold-rankers tried, but when their flesh started melting, they came out quick, looking shaken.”

Liara had sensed the attention of the other gold-rankers. Pelli was organising the civilians, both the looky-loo locals and the mining facility evacuees. The others were waiting for

Liara to be done with her husband. She turned back to Baseph, who rolled his eyes.

“I’m fine,” he told her. “I need to get on to organising the facility staff anyway. Everyone is shaken up by what we’ve been through.”

“Aunt Pelli is doing that just fine,” Liara said, intertwining her fingers with his. “You’re not leaving my side.”

“Liara, I’m alright.”

“You remember that I can read your emotions, right?”

“I remember you doing so means it’s time for one of our conversations about boundaries.”

“This is why I want to hurry up and get you to gold rank.”

“And I told you there’s no rush. You know how I feel about buying that many cores all at once. The price gets ramped up when they have to source that many at the same time and it’s wasteful enough as is.”

“You do realise I’m a princess of a fairly prominent kingdom, right?”

“I thought you preferred to earn the things you get?”

She smiled in spite of herself and nodded, then leaned in to kiss his cheek. “Yes, but what’s the point if I don’t *occasionally* take advantage? I’m happy you’re alive, husband.”

“I’d say that’s a low standard,” he told her, “but I’ve met Karen’s husband. There’s a reason he keeps taking jobs in the northern drill pits.”

“Be nice,” she mock-scolded. She moved towards the archway, tugging him along as she refused to let go of his hand. The two gold-rankers turned at her approach. One was a healer she was only passingly familiar with. The other was a man she knew well, a drain-healer named Nacio Elan. He greeted Liara and Baseph as they approached while his companion glowered in silence.

“Liara. Bas, good to see you safe. Lee, what did you send us off to do? What is going on in this place?”

“I was hoping you could tell me, Nacio,” Liara said. “You’ve been in there, right?”

“Not for long. I didn’t get halfway up the stairs before getting out. There’s only silver-rank magic, but something has boosted it like nothing I’ve ever seen. It’s like someone ate a diamond-rank spirit coin, except instead of a person, it’s the whole damn building. And what is going on with the aura in there? It feels like the temple to a god of being a controlling asshole.”

“A diamond-rank coin might not be too far off the mark,” Baseph said. “I overheard Asano and his team talking about it. It’s not a diamond-rank coin, but it’s something similar. Whatever it is was powerful enough to let Asano portal out through deep granite. Plus, he took more of us through than he should have been able to.”

“Spirit coins boost your attributes,” Nacio said, “not the parameters of your essence abilities. Not even a diamond-rank coin can do that.”

Baseph was about to speak when Shade emerged from Liara’s shadow, to the surprise of the gold-rankers. A silver-rank anything getting that close to them unnoticed, even if they weren’t paying attention, was unsettling.

“With respect, Lord Rimaros,” Shade said to Baseph, “I would appreciate if you would refrain from speculating on Mr Asano’s secrets in an open forum.”

“It doesn’t matter what secrets he has if he’s dead,” Liara said.

“That is untrue,” Shade said. “It is also, for the moment, irrelevant.”

“This is Asano’s familiar, Shade,” Liara introduced. “Shade, can you get them inside?”

“Unfortunately not,” Shade said. “Mr Asano is insensible at the moment and the cloud house is reacting reflexively, in accordance with Mr Asano’s level of trust.”

“We can’t go in there,” Nacio said. “Could you bring him out so we can work on him?”

“I am afraid that we have moved past that stage before your arrival,” Shade said, “or we would have done so. I believe that I must apologise for wasting your time in requesting Lady Liara bring you. At this stage, Mr Asano lives or dies by the will of those of us who stand with him and his stubborn refusal to die, no matter how many times the cosmos sees fit to kill him.”

The gold-rankers shared a troubled look. They were not used to being helpless to intervene in anything, let alone the affairs of a silver-ranker.

“Bro, they’re talking like we’re not standing right in front of them.”

“Gold-rankers,” Gary agreed, shaking his head.

“Do you think Jason’s going to be alright?” Travis asked.

“Of course he is,” Gary said. “He’ll come out, say something smug and have some ridiculous new soul power. That’s what always happens. I tried mourning him once—total waste of time. Turns out he just went off to visit his mum.”

“Actually, they don’t get on,” Taika said.

The gold-rankers watched Gary, Taika and Travis talk as if they weren’t standing right in front of them. Liara was about to say something when the black hole in their aura senses got very, very full.

Blue and orange light lit up overhead as a tyrannical aura washed out from the temple. The previously silent gold-ranker grunted with distaste.

“Sin auras,” he muttered unhappily. “And people say dragon auras are arrogant.”

The crowd moved back from the walls to get a better look at what was lighting up the sky above. The gold-rankers moved the furthest and fastest with their natural speed, along with Baseph, who was pulled behind Liara like a paper

streamer. They stopped, turned and looked to see a giant, eye-shaped nebula floating over the temple.

“What is that?” Nacio asked.

“It looks like one of Asano’s eyes,” Liara said.

Baseph’s attention, after he recovered from being dragged along by his wife, was focused on the aura now flooding the area, particularly its effect on the lower-ranked civilians. They were visibly unnerved by its tyrannical nature, but it wasn’t exhibiting the destructiveness of a truly uncontrolled aura. Whatever Asano was going through, on some level, he was demonstrating restraint.

Even during a monster surge, the airship traffic through Rimaros was heavy. The largest sky port was on Provo, but the one on Livaros was generally considered the most important—at least by people who considered themselves important. Provo was the most populous island and its sky port was one of the most trafficked mercantile hubs in the world. Livaros was the playground of aristocrats and adventurers, with a sky port more accommodating to the vessels of the wealthy than efficient trade haulers. Along with the regular airships, the sky port boasted more exotic vehicles, such as hollow metal birds the size of private jets.

Carlos Quilido was a humble man by nature, but there was only so humble the world would allow a gold-ranker to be, so the airship he was on was directed to the port at Livaros. Carlos himself was unassuming, in simple clothes of light brown, in a loose cut to breathe in the humid tropical climate. The wet, heavy air would not make the gold-ranker sweat, but it could make him uncomfortable, should he dress inappropriately.

An expert at aura manipulation, Carlos did not stand out through his inherent presence, although the sculpted and unblemished perfection of his looks marked him as a high-ranker. He was a broad-shouldered and swarthy man. The

observant would notice the little details that marked him as an adherent of the Healer. Subtleties in the cut of his clothes made the loosely draped suit slightly reminiscent of robes, while certain patterns in the stitching had meaning to those versed in the right religious texts.

Passenger travel was uncommon during a monster surge, especially for a gold-ranker. Anything worth dispatching a gold-ranker for was usually worth organising a portal for. Carlos was a healer, but in an extremely niche specialty. As it was not a specialisation that typically called for an urgent response, he was used to travelling at a more sedate pace than adventurers, whose number he was not included in. He had spent his share of time in the field, but he was a priest and a core user, not a combat expert.

Carlos primarily served the Healer by helping those suffering soul-harm, body matrix damage and other related cases not easily healed through ordinary restoration magic. He usually worked with individuals or small groups for weeks or even months at a time. A key component of his work was researching so that others might be more readily helped in the future.

Despite his work being very far from that of an adventurer, a gold-ranker was still a gold-ranker. As he made his way to his latest destination, he had stepped up more than once as monsters approached his vessel, although no fights took place. A directed burst of his gold-rank aura was sufficient to warn off silver-rank monsters and they had been fortunate enough to not attract any golds. This had allowed the trip to go uneventfully, his fellow passengers never even realising they were under threat. The exquisite aura control Carlos had made the entire process go wholly unnoticed by the sky ship's passengers and crew.

The airship docked at the sky port, attaching itself to a tunnel jutting from the side of one of the enormous docking towers. Carlos was about to disembark along the passenger tunnel when he sensed a pair of familiar auras rising from below the airship.

A small flying skiff appeared alongside the skyship. Onboard were Arabelle Remore, whom Carlos had worked with many times, along with her son, Rufus. The boy had been bronze rank last time they met, in a provincial city where Carlos had spent time working with a very unusual case. And for him, that was saying something.

Along with a pilot for the skiff, there was a third person on board: a woman he did not know whose aura marked her both as an adventurer and an outworlder. Given the special case connected to Rufus Remore involved a different outworlder, his curiosity was piqued.

“Arabelle,” he said with a big smile. “You could have waited until I was at least off the boat.”

“No time,” she said. “Get on.”

Carlos hopped lightly aboard and Arabelle nodded at the pilot, who immediately set out.

“I didn’t think they let these little vessels roam around the docks like this,” Carlos said.

“They don’t,” Arabelle said. “Special dispensation.”

“I see.”

Carlos shook Rufus’ hand. With his expertise in the mental health field, Carlos picked out a little emotional scarring in the boy’s aura but nothing drastic; it was an old wound. It had been fresh the last time Carlos had seen him, shortly after losing a team member. He was much-recovered, which was unsurprising given his mother’s expertise in mental health. The interrelatedness of their fields was the reason Carlos and Arabelle had worked together many times, especially since she reached gold rank and spent far less time adventuring.

“It’s been a while, Rufus,” Carlos said. “Congratulations on ranking up.”

“Thank you, sir,” Rufus said.

Carlos then turned his attention to the outworlder; a woman with strawberry-blonde hair who seemed slight at a glance, but a careful eye picked out compact muscle.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure. I am Carlos Quilido, priest of the Healer.”

“Farrah Hurin,” she said. “I’m more about the other side of the business.”

“The other side?”

“Putting people in need of healing.”

“Ah.”

Gold-rankers had excellent memories and something teased at Carlos’ mind. Where had he heard that name before? Then he remembered, his gaze moving to Rufus and then back at Farrah. It was not just Arabelle that had helped Rufus along.

“You’re Mr Remore’s dead team member,” Carlos said to Farrah.

“No,” she said. “I’m Mr Remore’s team member that died. There’s a small but crucial difference.”

“Quite so,” Carlos agreed. “You rather remind me of someone else of Mr Remore’s acquaintance. He was also an outworlder.”

“Still is,” Rufus said. “We’re heading to him now, in fact.”

“We suspect he is going to need your help,” Arabelle said. “Should he survive.”

“Survive?” Carlos asked. He turned a contemplative look on Farrah, another outworlder who, by all accounts, had passed away. “He’s also back from the dead?”

“A few times, since you met him,” Farrah told him. “It never sticks. He comes back from the dead so much, he brought me with him one time for laughs.”

“I see,” Carlos said. “Actually, I don’t, but imagine I’ll catch up.”

THE AWAKENING OF MR ASANO

UNDER THE SUPPRESSING HOOD, MELODY SHOULDN'T HAVE been able to sense anything. Even the oppressive aura pervading the strange cloud building had been cut off once the hood was yanked back over her head. So when that aura punched through the hood, stronger than ever, it was a startling experience, being the only thing she could sense.

At the risk of being punched in the head by her daughter again, she reached up and pulled off the hood. She immediately noticed the massive light show overhead and Asano's aura, even more pervasive now that the hood was gone. All attention was elsewhere and Melody took a gamble attempting to slink away. There were only a couple of the shadow familiars left and even Sophie was too distracted by the giant eye washing the platform in blue and orange light. With the aura washing out any other magical sense, no one noticed as Melody slipped through the doorway and went looking for a way out.

Melody's speed was limited by the shackles on her wrists and ankles, but she adapted fairly well, managing a surprisingly swift shuffle. She made her way down the stairs quickly, ducking through an open doorway as she heard three people come rushing up the stairs. Pressed against the wall, she heard them go right past her on the other side. Fortunately, there was no risk of them sensing her aura with Asano's continuing to ramp up.

While she was certainly curious as to what was going on, she wouldn't give up a precious chance of freedom over it.

Fortunately, the aura was not hostile, feeling more like a benevolent, yet utterly unyielding dictator.

Melody made her way down the stairs, spotting a large open archway that led outside, but something rose from the floor, not through it, but being made from the cloud-stuff the floor was comprised of. It was made of the same dark cloud-stuff as the floor from which it emerged, but then the cloud stuff became more substantive. It took the form of a person who was not tall in the first place and made all the shorter by the absence of a head. The cloud material became solid, blank and featureless—a black, headless mannequin.

A nebulous blue and orange eye blinked into existence large enough to occupy the space where the mannequin's head should have been. Then red robes, the colour of dried blood, were conjured over it, as was a hooded cloak, void-black and dotted with stars.

It looked like Asano if one of his eyes had grown to replace his entire head, the eye watching from the hood like an alien face. Melody stood still as she and the strange entity watched one another. She took a cautious step forward, then another as the entity didn't react. Then she tried dashing past and it blurred into motion. Its cloak floated around it, obscuring it just as Asano's had when she fought him. Its movements, or what she could see of them, seemed identical to Asano's.

It intercepted her as it conjured a black and red dagger into its hand. She tried to dodge, but the dagger went beyond normal reach, using an arm made of shadows, and slashed her arm. She was better than Asano and this strange replica of him, but not while she was shackled and collared. Her movement was impeded and her powers suppressed, while the simulacrum could use at least some of Asano's abilities.

The entity smoothly flowed into her path, blocking her escape. It swung the dagger again and she fell back. The entity didn't follow, remaining between her and the archway leading out.

Melody looked at the cut on her arm and saw immediate evidence of brutal afflictions, feeling them in her body at the same time. The flesh around the wound was already darkening and veins were becoming visible as they turned black under her skin.

Blood was a part of every essence user's body, regardless of rank, not disappearing with rank the way the heart, lungs and even the brain did. The blood flow of a silver-ranker was not like that of a normal person, however. Their circulatory systems were closer to what Jason would recognise as a chart of meridians and acupoints. Even the blood itself was not the same, being a channel for mana rather than oxygen and the other elements critical to a human body.

Melody felt the taint coursing through her blood, left behind by the entity's conjured dagger. It was unpleasant, but not anything she couldn't deal with if she just got away. She hadn't been subjected to the dangerous spell Asano used to endlessly escalate his afflictions.

"Your fate is to suffer."

The entity didn't sound like a living thing, its voice tombstone cold. Melody knew Asano's powers and she knew that incantation, having been given thorough information on Asano and his insidious abilities. She wasn't sure how he was replicating himself while dying upstairs, but now she had to get away and find a way to cleanse herself before the afflictions now growing inside her became too advanced to deal with.

She knew she wouldn't be able to get past the entity while she was manacled, but it only seemed to be blocking her way out. She went back up the stairs in search of another egress but found a second, identical entity rising from the floor. She looked back, confirming there were two of them.

The new one raised an arm, pointing not the way she had come but through a door. Outnumbered, collared and chained, Melody played along. Now that the afflictions eating into her flesh were escalating, she needed someone to remove them and fast. It was now clear that she would only find that as a

prisoner. The entity led her into a room, an empty black cube, devoid of any features other than the doorway she had walked through.

“If you don’t find someone to get these afflictions off of me,” she said, turning to face the entity, “you might as well kill me and save the suffering.”

The entity raised a hand and Melody’s eyes went wide, wondering if it was going to take her up on killing her.

“Feed us your sins.”

Having her life force radiate out from her body was a surprisingly warm and pleasant sensation, surrounding her with a red glow. She both saw and felt the taint in her life force, and also how it was drained away, vanishing into the entity’s hand. Her life force receded into her body, but the entity didn’t lower its hand. Leeches shot out of it, splattering across her body. She moved to start swatting them away but then paused, looking back to the entity that was now lowering its hand.

The leeches did not appear to be replicas created from cloud stuff but the genuine article: Asano’s actual familiar. Despite their tiny rings of savage lamprey teeth, the leeches were not drinking her blood. She realised they were a warning not to go wandering again.

The doorway behind the entity closed. There was no light in the room, only the blue-orange glow of the nebula eye, inside the hood. Everything went black as the eye blinked out of existence.

In the dark, Melody was not afraid but contemplative. The information she had was that Asano’s cleansing power was more deadly to enemies than the afflictions it removed, yet she felt nothing but refreshed. While the wound on her arm remained, the afflictions delivered through it did not, and nothing had been left in their place. The fact that her peak-silver recovery attribute was healing the wound fast enough that she could feel it was evidence enough.

Carlos looked at the giant image of daylight inside a cloak, inside a dark field that towered over the island below it. Taller than any building he had ever seen, they had spotted it well before the island came into view.

“That’s him, alright,” Carlos said.

In Greenstone, several years ago, Carlos had once tested Jason, projecting his aura with a ritual to check that there was not a star seed of the Builder hidden in his soul. Underestimating the power Jason’s soul could output, relative to his lowly iron rank, Carlos had made the ritual too powerful. The result was a similar, but much smaller image being projected over the city of Greenstone, along with Jason’s aura.

In the hours following the appearance of the massive projection, the aura it extended slowly diminished. Night came and the daylight portion of the projection lit up the sky of Arnote until the projection itself finally grew smaller as the dawn approached. As for the woman named Dawn, she did not approach, watching, unnoticed, from high in the air. Her vessel, a cottage inside a translucent bubble, was invisible to the eyes and magical senses of all but the local diamond-rankers.

She stood in the cottage garden, right where it met the globe, looking below. After having used her single intervention to eliminate one of the Builder’s cities, she had to be careful about anything that could be seen as her intervening again. She could not afford to be further restricted before the next time she needed to act, which was still years away.

If she’d been forced to step in to keep Jason alive, it would have been a significant problem. The Builder could have leveraged the infraction and it would have made things much

more difficult later. The World-Phoenix's interest in Jason ended once the integrity of the two worlds was assured, which meant that forces currently held at bay by that attention would no longer hold back from acting. The next time Dawn could step in to help Jason, it would be wholly of her own volition, without the World-Phoenix's support. If she had already been punished for overstepping, that would be more difficult, if even possible at all.

Dawn's senses were not blocked even by the monumental aura spilling out of the cloud temple like some spiritual cataclysm. She kept careful watch over Jason's condition and felt relief wash through her as she felt him pass out of danger. He was hideously damaged, both physically and spiritually, and would take a long time to recover, but he would survive. And inside the cloud construct, he was about as safe as he could be short of Dawn hiding him herself.

With the commotion kicked up by the display coming from Jason's cloud temple, the Adventure Society and Magic Society were forced to step in, along with the civic authorities. While not being harmful to anyone, the aura coming from the temple caused panic across the island, especially in conjunction with the humongous physical projection that went with it. Coming not so long after the Builder city attack on Rimaros, many thought another such attack was in progress.

While the authorities were moving to handle the chaos, various others had more specific goals. Carlos, Arabelle, Farrah and Rufus arrived and immediately entered the temple, none of them being rejected. Greetings were brief, the team knowing Carlos from the months he spent helping Jason years before.

The platform at the top of the cloud temple was large, which was useful with the increasing number of people present. Along with the unconscious Jason was his team, Rufus and his team, Taika, Travis, Arabelle and Carlos. Shade's presence was a pair of bodies, glowing blue-white

with overcharged mana. He was not the only familiar, with Stash having, at some point, shifted from Belinda's form to Jason's as he fretted. The copy Jason looked down at the real one, identical aside from looking much healthier and having a bushy moustache.

Under the domineering sky projection, Carlos confirmed that Jason would survive, although he warned the others that the recovery time would be extensive. He would likely not even wake up for days, possibly weeks. On hearing that, Humphrey looked up at the projection, then at the team.

"You know what Jason would have us doing in this situation," he said.

"Making sandwiches," Neil said. After working with Clive and Shade to keep Jason alive, all three looked worse for wear. Neil looked exhausted, Clive was pale and his dark brown hair had turned such a glossy black, it looked almost like it had a blue sheen. Shade was even more off-colour than Clive's hair, his usual black mostly silver-blue.

"No," Humphrey said. "He would not... okay, he probably *would* want us making sandwiches, but more importantly, he isn't the only member of the team in danger. Before things went so wrong, we had a plan, and that plan is still in motion. Belinda is going to reveal the location of the enemy stronghold and we have to be ready to move when she does."

"We're in too," Rufus said, Gary and Farrah nodding their agreement.

Humphrey looked at Carlos and Arabelle, talking quietly where they were crouched over Jason.

"We need to leave him to the experts," he said. "Princess Liara was assembling the strike team for the stronghold, so we need to go find her and join it."

"I am afraid that I will be of limited assistance," Shade said. "The two bodies I have here are infused with overcharged mana. They will break down in a relatively short time and are of little use unless you need something to explode."

“Oh, I imagine we can find a use for that,” Farrah said.

“My four remaining intact bodies are with Belinda, Princess Liara, Korinne Pescos in the mining facility, and the Adventure Society official currently managing the mining facility evacuation,” Shade said. “The princess is already on her way back to Livaros with her husband. I will inform her of your intentions and your imminent arrival, if that is satisfactory.”

“It is,” Humphrey said. “Clive, we’re going to need a ride.”

Magic seeped through the front of Clive’s clothes, coalescing into the form of his rune tortoise familiar, Onslow. Onslow floated in the air and grew, the shell opening into top and bottom halves. Inside was a little humanoid tortoise, looking out curiously with big eyes.

“Wait, where’s the zealot?” Sophie asked, remembering Melody.

“The cloud house has detained her,” Shade said. “Colin is currently guarding her.”

“What do you mean, the cloud house detained her?” Clive asked.

“I am not entirely clear on that,” Shade said. “I suspect answers will wait on the awakening of Mr Asano.”

“But he probably got some absurd new ability from all this, didn’t he?” Neil asked.

“It would appear so,” Shade said.

“See?” Gary asked Taika. “What did I say?”

WE'RE ADVENTURERS

“CLEAR,” SHADE SIGNALLED BELINDA.

She was wary of using her aura senses to check for order members as it wasn't in character, so Shade was serving as lookout. The tunnels of the stronghold were dug right out of the mountain and carved smooth. Wall sconces provided light from glow stones, but they were dimmed down to a deep gloom. The sconces regulated light in the complex, mimicking the daylight patterns outside. It was an approach common to underground spaces designed for long-term habitation, including the mining complex where Belinda had split from her team. The idea was to prevent those living underground for extended periods from losing their sense of time.

Belinda stepped around the corner and up to a doorway set with brickwork around it, rather than the stone from which most of the walls had been carved. She had a handful of chalk sticks in very similar shades of grey, all quite close to the colour of the bricks. She held them up to a light sconce affixed beside the doorway, using the light to compare the chalk to the brickwork for the closest match.

After picking one, she started drawing sigils in the bricks. The chalk was a close enough match that she couldn't even make out what she was drawing on them, especially in the dim light.

“It is fortunate that you had an appropriate shade of chalk,” Shade noted.

“Lucky, my pert-yet-supple flanks. You have no idea how many colours I have in storage. I think I have more magic supplies than Clive, although mine are a bit different.”

“I stand corrected.”

“I didn’t think you stood at all,” Belinda said as she crouched down to scrawl on a low brick. “I thought you just floated there, pretending to stand.”

“Miss Belinda, I understand that you were raised among the underclass, but I would think you have been an adventurer long enough to understand that it is impolite to point out the shortcomings of others.”

Belinda chuckled as she continued drawing sigils.

“If I might ask, Miss Belinda, how can you tell what is behind each of these secure doors?”

“Magical infrastructure on a large scale falls within only a handful of different patterns for each type of installation. There’s not a lot of point reinventing what’s been iterated on many times and works reliably. It makes it easier to find replacements for damaged elements and people with experience doing the work. My guess is that whatever poor pricks dug this place out were disposed of after. It’d take a good lot of them, even using magic, and the villains couldn’t leave them to talk. It kind of shows in the workmanship that whoever did this place up didn’t put their heart into it. Good for us, because it leaves plenty to exploit.”

“This allowed you to map out the place from known patterns?”

“Only to a degree. There’s a reason we went wandering about the place, watching people go in and out. Add that to some confident assumptions and a bit of extrapolation and I have a decent idea of what we’re looking at. It’s also how I came up with the specifics of our plan here. The important bit was figuring out where the prisoner was.”

Belinda was crouched down to finish the last brick, then stood up, slapping her hands casually to knock off chalk dust.

“How long until these lights come on?” she asked.

Shade pulled a watch from his storage space.

“Six hours and nine minutes. But there will be people moving around before the lights come back on.”

“That’s why I have you looking out for me. Once the lights come back up, the chalk will still be hard to notice, but silver-rank eyes are sharp. The sigils might get spotted, especially if someone has some obscure perception ability.”

Belinda stood up, stowing the chalk in her own storage space as Shade did the same with the watch.

“You share that storage with all the other Shade bodies, right?”

“Strictly speaking, each body has its own storage space and can tap into the storage space of any other body. A body that gets destroyed autonomically pushes the contents of its storage to other bodies, if available. If cut off, such as by astral spaces that block communication or emplaced defences, like this facility, we cannot access other storage.”

“So, no getting around being cut off by passing notes?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Best get moving, then, if we’re going to get this done by morning. See if we can’t crack open this egg.”

“Alacrity would be best,” Shade agreed. “I do not know the circumstances, but I believe that most of my other bodies have been destroyed.”

No shortage of people had been drawn to Arnote by the aura that crashed out like a spiritual tsunami. Even as far away as Livaros, the diamond-rankers, all but the most oblivious golds and even some sensitive silver-rankers picked up on the commotion, despite the enormous distance. That alone was terrifying, prompting various interests to send people to investigate.

As more people gathered around in the previously sleepy beach town, it was not hard for Soramir to blend in with his aura masterfully restrained. Few people could recognise him on sight, although it was more than before following his participation in the battle against the Builder city. As adventurers were prone to favouring large hoods to seem mysterious, however, slipping one on made for a highly effective disguise.

The crowd growing in the town was made up primarily of bronze-rankers, shoved onto any available transport and sent to investigate like canaries into a coal mine. The established forces were already organising things, with the Magic Society, Adventure Society and local authorities doing their best to keep some kind of order as essence users crowded the little town.

While the people around him could not see through Soramir's aura disguise, they were an open book to his diamond-rank senses. He blended into the crowd, easily picking out those who, like him, were hiding their true strength. He had also noticed Dawn up in the sky, but did not so much as glance in that direction.

He recognised a man who was similarly disguised by his aura and approached, activating a privacy screen around them. It was an unremarkable move as every little cluster of people was using a similar shield. Soramir's was of the finest quality—an expensive combination of very powerful and very subtle.

“Archbishop,” he said in greeting to the man wearing a hood much like his own.

“Ancestral Majesty,” the archbishop said, sounding unsurprised.

“Your lord told you it was me, didn't he?” Soramir asked, wry amusement in his voice. “This is why I dislike working with clergy.”

The archbishop glanced in the direction of Dawn's flying vessel, invisible to the naked eye and all but the most powerful of magical senses.

“You’ve been dealing with those more powerful than you more than usual of late,” the archbishop noted. “But also those far less. Perhaps returning to this world has broadened your horizons in both directions.”

“I don’t strictly hold that gods are more powerful than me,” Soramir clarified. “They simply operate on a different paradigm.”

Soramir sensed the amusement in the priest.

“Of course, Ancestral Majesty.”

“What is it that prompted you to come in person, Archbishop?”

“I imagine the same thing that brought you, Ancestral Majesty.”

“He truly is favoured by your god, then? I suspected as much the first time I got a look at his aura.”

“He caught our god’s eye much earlier than you did, if you’ll forgive the comparison, Ancestral Majesty. You were more conservative than Mr Asano in your youth.”

“I’ve never heard my early years described like that before,” Soramir said. “Just the opposite, in fact. Although, I certainly didn’t cause this kind of commotion at silver rank. Even when he’s not directly involved, Asano always seems at least tangentially connected to every absurd event this monster surge throws at us.”

“To be fair, Ancestral Majesty, he was the one who set it off in the first place.”

“Are you or your god going to intervene in events here?”

“No. You know that those with my god’s favour are expected to forge their own path. In any case, my god cannot see inside the building, let alone meddle. Even the platform open to the sky is hidden from the gods, while you and I could see should we simply fly into the air.”

“It really is a temple, then?”

“Not as the gods would sanctify, from what I understand, but something that uses the same methods. A mortal needs different things from a temple than a god, or so I would assume.”

“And something went wrong with Asano’s temple?”

“As my god explained it, Asano seems to have attempted to found another temple on the land around his existing one.”

“A temple to what?”

“Himself.”

“That may be the single most arrogant thing I have ever heard. And I’ve met people who rule planets.”

“The attempt was never intended to succeed, Ancestral Majesty. Asano seems to have injected himself with power beyond his ability to endure, then attempted a task beyond his ability to accomplish, burning that power off in the failed attempt.”

“But how was he even able to make that attempt? Isn’t the founding of temples the domain of gods?”

“Yes,” the Archbishop said. “Yes, it is.”

“I can see why Dominion is so interested in him.”

Liara was back at her post in one of the Adventure Society admin buildings, using the Shade body with her and the one still in the mining facility to communicate with the adventurers there. Baseph was in the next room, reuniting with their son.

Humphrey, Sophie, Neil and Clive were shown in by reluctant Adventure Society functionaries. Both Humphrey and Sophie’s shadows were tinted blue and radiated volatile magic. Liara had needed to personally intervene to allow them into the building.

“What are you doing here?” Liara asked. “Did something happen to Asano?”

“Jason is out of danger,” Humphrey told her. “The same is not true for every member of our team.”

“You want a place on the response team waiting to hit the Purity stronghold,” Liara deduced.

“You said this was an option if we were out of the mining facility in time,” Humphrey said.

“Things have escalated a little since then,” Liara said. “And unless Asano is joining you, you don’t have the option of him using Shade to get in and open a portal.”

“Jason won’t be joining us,” Humphrey said. “Even so, we would like to be part of the response group.”

“I’ve talked to Baseph about what happened. He said you brought a prisoner with you out of the mining complex.”

She turned her gaze on Sophie but didn’t elaborate.

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Sophie said.

“I need that prisoner.”

“No, you *want* that prisoner,” Neil said.

“Hypothetical prisoner,” Clive clarified. “If she did exist, you have to realise she would be more likely to at least have hostile exchanges with us. To you, she’s just another Purity worshipper you can’t get to talk.”

“I’ve also been speaking with Callum Morse.”

“Are you saying you won’t give us a place in the group unless we hand over this alleged prisoner?” Humphrey asked.

“Yes.”

Humphrey turned without another word, the others moving to follow.

“Wait,” Liara said.

The team half-turned to look back at her.

“You aren’t going to threaten to take Shade away if I don’t help you?” she asked.

“Without Shade, helping the people still in that mining facility is harder,” Neil said.

“We’re adventurers,” Clive added. “We’d never do that.”

“Just to be clear,” Sophie chimed in, “I definitely would do that and said that we should.”

Humphrey frowned at her.

“I was out-voted,” Sophie added, refusing to meet his eyes in the manner of a guilty child. Humphrey gave his head an exasperated shake and looked back at Liara.

“Jason wouldn’t do it either,” he said. “So Shade wouldn’t stop helping you, whatever we said.”

“Alright, I’ll give you a slot in the group,” Liara conceded. “But we aren’t done talking about that prisoner.”

In the Order of Redeeming Light’s hollowed-out mountain stronghold, the light sconces slowly grew brighter as the morning approached outside. Some of the order members were already up and about, being early risers by nature, but were somewhat at a loss as to what to do with themselves. Deprived of Melody’s leadership and with the two remaining cell leaders circling one another like hyenas around a carcass, they were uncharacteristically directionless.

The first stage of Belinda’s plan had been to move through the stronghold during the night, writing sigils on many of the magically secured doors. The transition point of the plan came as the order members were just starting to rouse and was less subtle.

The section of the facility dividing the general areas from the leader-restricted areas was an open archway with no more magical protection than signal magic should someone without permission or any dangerous substance pass through. As it sailed through the archway, Belinda’s magical bomb was detected as dangerous.

THE PERSON IN MY CARE

THERE WAS NO ONE IN THE SMALL LOUNGE AREA WHEN THE bomb went off and it did nothing more than smash up and knock around some furniture. The goal was neither harm nor damage but to trigger the alarm and sow some chaos. People were quick to scramble, but they were running everywhere, knowing they should be reacting but uncertain as to how or what was even happening. This chaos allowed Belinda to move without being remarked upon while she waited for the two leaders to do her work for her. It wasn't long before they did exactly that, triggering the facility lockdown.

The stronghold's most secure rooms would have taken time and resources for Belinda to crack open just one, let alone the several she would doubtless need to find the right rooms to perform her sabotage. What she had noticed in her initial scouting, however, was that the reinforced doors could be further secured by having more magic funnelled into them.

This was a setup quite common to places that people like Belinda were hired to remove things from, despite the owners not wanting them to. It was also a setup Belinda looked down on; it was something an infrastructure specialist would devise, rather than a security specialist. It was neat, clean and efficient, making it ripe for dirtying up.

Belinda had drawn sigils onto the doors to apply a crude but effective modification to enchantments built into the doorway. It didn't do anything in normal operation, but that would change should a lockdown be triggered. That would cause the facility infrastructure to feed additional magic

through the brickwork doorframe and into the door, reinforcing both the door itself and the locking mechanism.

The mistake an infrastructure specialist made, that a security specialist would not, was keeping the setup overly simple. This made it less prone to failure during normal operation, but more prone to tampering. Belinda targeted a simple aspect of the system that shut off the extra magic once the door's extra security was fully charged. Her modification stopped the magic spigot from closing once it was opening, continually feeding magic into the door.

Unknowingly, Belinda had done a very similar thing to the doors to what Shade had done to his own bodies, dangerously overcharging them through excessive magic drain. The end result was also similar, making the doors extremely volatile. The bomb had done its job and prompted the cell leaders currently running the facility to order a lockdown. Belinda knew that she had some time while the doors built up charge before things got exciting.

In the time it took the doors to accumulate enough power to explode, Belinda made good time moving through the facility towards her objectives. The ordinary doors at the end of each tunnel and the entrance to each room had been automatically closed and sealed by the lockdown, but that barely slowed her down. Unlike the secure doors she'd taken the time to modify, ordinary magic locks gave way to Belinda's specialty tools in moments. This gave her more mobility through the complex than anyone but the leaders, whom the locks did not bar.

As Belinda moved around, she repeatedly paused to drop a quick spell.

“Emplace the mark of power.”

It was a spell she shared with Clive, albeit through different essences. The Rune Trap spell created a glowing sigil on the floor, which she placed in front of the locking mechanisms the leaders would need to release to move around freely. The designated spot displayed a glowing rune for a few moments—the critical weakness of the Rune Trap—before

turning invisible. Someone sufficiently perceptive might pick up on the rune's presence, but even if they did, their purpose was to slow down the order members.

How they were slowed made little practical difference to Belinda, although her preference was by blowing people up. One power wasn't enough to kill a silver-ranker, but the trap was enough to ring their bell very, very hard. If she was lucky, the blasts would damage some of the locking mechanisms, meaning the doors would stay shut until smashed down or the mechanism was repaired.

Failing brutal explosions, other methods to deal with the traps would slow them down enough. Taking the time to locate, identify and negate the traps would delay them considerably, assuming they even had people with the right abilities. She guessed that the Purity worshippers had no shortage of dispelling abilities, though. The fastest approach would probably be to walk the purified converted into the traps and set them off, at which point damage to the locks would be her best hope.

Belinda had wasted no time after infiltrating the stronghold, identifying her key targets in the hours before most of the order went to sleep for the night. She was guesstimating which of the secure rooms held facility infrastructure and which held the defences she was here to disable, but her guesses were pretty good in facilities like this. She had rigged enough of the secure doors around the facility both to obfuscate her targets and give her access to enough rooms that she'd find the right ones to sabotage the place, even with a false start or two. Even then, she could probably have some fun along the way.

Belinda's main concern was not successfully sabotaging the place. Anything as comprehensive as shielding the interior of an entire mountain would have no shortage of potential failure points. Her worry was getting caught in the period between sabotaging the defences and reinforcements arriving.

“I’m not sure I want to go in there,” Belinda said.

She had found where the Order of Redeeming Light’s prisoner, Gibson Amouz, was being held. The floor, ceiling and three of the walls were the usual flat stone, with incredibly intricate ritual diagrams carved into each. The last wall was made of glass, through which Belinda was observing the room from the outside. The glass was also etched with an intricate ritual diagram that, like all the others, glowed with silver light.

In the centre of the room, Gibson Amouz looked the worse for wear, strung up in a cage too narrow for him to do anything but stand. Surrounding the cage was a ring of silver flames.

“Actually,” Belinda added, “I’m not certain I *can* go in there.”

The feature conspicuously absent from the room was a door. Belinda looked around, seeing a few subtle signs that the glass could be made to flow like a liquid to create an opening, but she was certain that doing so in the middle of the ritual going on would be very bad for the person inside. She had a feeling he was being subjected to whatever the order did to ‘purify’ their prospective members.

“I don’t think I can rescue this guy,” she said. “I won’t be able to extract him from whatever’s happening in there without doing more harm than good.”

“You can’t decipher how to safely interrupt the ritual?” Shade asked.

“No,” she said. “Well, probably, but not anywhere near fast enough. I’m a practical magic specialist; this kind of high-end, magic-for-magic’s-sake stuff is Clive’s area. Also, I’m pretty sure there’s divine magic involved in this ritual. That doesn’t mean it can’t be handled, but it’s also something I haven’t dealt with a lot.”

“You didn’t rob a lot of temples?” Shade asked.

“Absolutely not,” Belinda said, plainly affronted. “I would never. Well, not *never*— desperate times, you know. But definitely not a lot. I mean, ‘a lot’ is a very vague term. Different people might define—”

“More than five.”

“Oh, who seriously thinks five is a lot? You can count that on one hand.”

The two cell leaders, Elise and Marika, stormed angrily through the mountain stronghold, collecting scattered order members as they came across them. They burned with identical, furious frustration as things spiralled further and further out of control. Not least of their frustrations was being forced to work with each other, but larger problems dominated their factional rivalry.

Things had been going wrong since the mining facility, when the Adventure Society responded to the order's incursion with impossible speed. At first, it had seemed like the perfect opportunity for the pair. After everything going her way for so long, Melody had finally made a critical mistake as the operation quickly collapsed.

While not ideal for the order, both Elise and Marika saw the chance to seize control and lead the order in a better direction. Escaping Melody's disaster was a triumph, with the only problem for each being that the other escaped as well. They were both grateful that none of the other cell leaders had made it out, leaving only one obstacle to dominance.

For the moment, however, they were forced to work together. Melody's plan was only the first disaster, and the disarray left in its wake was only made the chaos they now faced worse. Explosions were happening everywhere and the lockdown was doing more harm than good. The order's members were scattered and Elise's core team, the ones loyal not just to Purity but to her personally, were coming together in dribs and drabs.

Trying to release the lockdown after struggling through one trapped room after another had outright failed. Damage and sabotage to the stronghold's magical infrastructure left many doors unresponsive to attempts to open them, and kept

numerous chambers and key passages sealed. The only benefit was that the rune traps served as a breadcrumb trail that would, sooner or later, lead to the perpetrator.

As for who was behind it, their best guess was the adventuring team that had helped them escape the mining facility. At first, their assignment guarding the dock had seemed serendipitous, but now they suspected design, their Adventure Society infiltrators having been turned against them.

Moving through one locked room after another was troublesome even when the majority of the rooms weren't trapped. Someone was messing with the utility infrastructure, causing the ubiquitous light sconces to act up. At one moment, they would shut off to plunge a room into darkness, only to then flare into a blinding candescence. Other times, they rapidly flickered between the two in a disorienting staccato strobe.

"Someone must have meddled with the utility rooms," Marika said.

"Oh, you think?" Elise asked. "No getting past you, is there? You'd make a terrific leader."

It was when her senses expanded that they truly started to panic. After becoming accustomed to having their magical senses boxed-in by the stronghold perception shields, being able to sense beyond them was unsettling, then dread-inducing as they realised the ramifications. If their senses now extended past the exterior of the mountain, anyone outside could now sense the interior. When they felt the artificial aura of a beacon device light up somewhere inside the mountain, they knew they were doomed.

"We're compromised," Marika said.

"Another stellar insight," Elise snarled, already moving in the direction of the submersible docks. Marika followed, but when they arrived, their dismay only grew. There should have been six of the submersible vehicles—five of the type the order used and one stolen materials hauler.

The hauler was just gone. One of the submersibles was starting to sink, another was already dipping below the water and the rest, from what Elise could see of the depths, had already sunk. Then Marika, who was better at seeing through water, finally pointed out something that Elise had not already noticed.

“There are two sunken submersibles and the two still sinking. The hauler has been turned sideways underwater and scuttled in the submerged tunnel, from what I can see, blocking off the underwater exit.”

“That leaves one submersible unaccounted for,” Elise said. “It looks like our turncoats have already fled.”

“But how do we get out now?” Marika asked. “Did Melody have a secret alternate exit?”

“You think she’d tell me and not you?”

“Then what? Do we swim for it? How much time do we ___”

They both looked up as something shook the mountain.

“I guess that’s why they call him the siege sword,” Neil observed. They watched from an airship as the dust cloud bloomed off the mountain. “It feels like he’d do better with a hammer essence or something.”

The response team had already been on a pair of airships and in the air, waiting for the beacon signal when it came. The Shade with Belinda had promptly shared its memories with the other bodies once the stronghold defences dropped, so Liara at the Adventure Society was immediately briefed. One each of the blue Shade bodies charged with volatile mana were on the two airships, briefing the expedition leaders there.

The airships were not trade vessels but rapid-deployment troop transports: small, fast and filled to the gills with adventurers. They had moved swiftly; not even gold-rank monsters were fool enough to mess with the cluster of auras

rocketing through the air. Arriving at the mountain, they had a good idea from Shade what was inside and didn't waste time. Gold-rankers immediately started to break right in through the side, none more effectively than Trenchant Moore, the siege sword.

While the other gold-rankers went right over the side of the airship, Trenchant had paused for a moment to gather energy. To the surprise of onlookers, he even drained the excess energy from Shade's body, returning it to its customary black.

"Ooh, that's a bit much," Trenchant said, eyes wide, then he too vaulted over the side of the skyship. Shortly thereafter, the side of the mountain exploded.

Callum Morse approached the ominous black cloud temple, pausing for a moment before stepping through the open archway with stairs leading up and in. He paid close attention to his condition, but it seemed the aura, while disconcerting, did not see him as hostile in the way he had heard about it treating others. He started making his way up the steps, attempting to push his senses through the walls but getting nowhere. Halfway up the stairs, he found someone standing in his way.

"Hello, Belle."

"Hello, Cal," Arabelle said. "You're making a mistake right now. I thought we talked about this."

"There's an opportunity for me here."

She shook her head, looking at him like he was a puppy resistant to toilet training.

"You're a good hunter, Cal. You always have been. But you're terrible with people. You always let me help you with that, but it seems that you've forgotten in the years since we were a team. Let me help you again, Cal."

"Are you saying you'll stand against me?"

“I’m saying that you’re only hurting your cause.”

“Not if I get what I came for.”

She shook her head, looking down with a grumbling moan.

“And Jason thinks *he’s* oblivious to consequences,” she muttered, then turned her gaze back up at her former teammate. “You’re bringing trouble to the person in my care, Callum.”

Her voice was gentle, but his face paled. He turned around and went back down the stairs.

I LOVE A HYPOCRITE

BELINDA'S ESCAPE FROM THE ORDER OF REDEEMING LIGHT'S stronghold, leaving a dock full of ruined submarines in her wake, was not made alone. Her companion was neither the one she hoped for nor intended, but she knew full well that no plan went perfectly.

The need for improvisation had started back when she found Gibson Amouz. Ideally, she would have extricated him to avoid his becoming collateral damage or a hostage when the Adventure Society breached the stronghold. After finding him caught up in a complicated ritual she would not risk interrupting, she was forced to leave him for the Adventure Society forces to rescue.

She had been midway through sabotaging the stronghold defence infrastructure when she had encountered the imprisoned Amouz. After she left him, she had to visit several more of the formerly secure rooms, their security doors now blasted off, before the protections dropped. Whatever infrastructure specialist had designed the place might have been poor on anti-tampering, but they were big on redundancy.

After completing the final sabotage sequence, the defences started to wind down as the magic fuelling them was interrupted. Belinda set up the aura beacon on a delay, which she hoped would draw the order members to it while she made good her escape. If she got too caught up avoiding the order, she would have to find a hiding spot and wait for the Adventure Society to arrive. If that happened, they would be taking a dim view of her stealing things, which wouldn't

impact what she'd already picked up wandering around. Unfortunately, a submersible wouldn't fit in her dimensional storage space.

By the time Belinda was making her way to the dock, the order had become active throughout the complex. They had dealt with many of the locked doors and traps she had left behind and were becoming harder to dodge. More and more she was slowing down to duck into rooms or storage spaces as enemies passed her by. She was still disguised as one of them, but the woman she was disguised as was a known follower. It wouldn't help Belinda's escape if she was recruited into the search for herself. On the upside, she came across more than a few things worth slipping into her storage space.

In the course of her escape, Belinda realised that the order had jumped to conclusions about the cause of their current troubles. The turncoat adventurers that had been secretly working for the order had helped them escape the mining facility and, having revealed themselves, joined the order in their stronghold. It was an understandable but incorrect assumption that they were the ones responsible for the sabotage that took place shortly after their arrival.

Belinda realised this was happening when she found a group of order members attacking the now-former adventurers. The silver-rank combat was typically destructive and she needed to find a way past the rolling battle. With a good number of doors still locked down, she picked one and cracked it open with her intrusion tools, locking it again behind her. Inside was a short tunnel, leading to a trap door that was also locked.

“Potentially promising.”

It took only moments to crack the lock on the hatch, revealing a spiral staircase leading down. At the bottom was yet another locked door, to another short tunnel and yet another locked door.

“I think I'm going to find something special in here.”

In the process of going through each lock, she realised that they weren't integrated into the wider infrastructure of the

facility. The doors weren't as secure as the ones Belinda had needed to blow up, but they were designed to remain permanently secured, and not just sealed during a lockdown.

With each lock that capitulated to the ministrations of her intrusion tools, Belinda's anticipation for whatever was waiting at the end grew. When she opened the final door, what she found inside was startling.

“What in the sweet gods is happening here?”

At first glance, she thought she had found another prisoner, in a torture chamber. It only took a moment to realise something entirely different was going on.

She moved close to the man chained upright in a freestanding metal rack. He looked at her with wild eyes, unable to speak through the gag strapped over his mouth. The chains suspended him in a spreadeagle vertical position, completely naked. The metal ball the gag used to fill his mouth was made of hardened and enchanted materials that even a silver-ranker apparently couldn't break through, although his rank was an assumption. She couldn't sense his aura with the suppression collar around his neck.

Belinda looked around the room, finding it was a very strange fit for the complex around it. Instead of the clean, minimalist stone, typical for the Church of Purity, this was opulent and luxurious, with rich wall treatments, thick carpeting and indulgent layers of pillows and soft blankets in lieu of furniture.

Belinda turned her attention back to the man standing in the vertical prison rack. Looking closer, she noticed the wrist and ankle shackles were cushioned with padding, as was the suppression collar.

“I've built some setups like this myself,” she told the man. “Lucrative stuff. They have this place back in my hometown they call The Fortress. Did Jason ever take you, Shade?”

“No,” Shade's voice came from Belinda's shadow. “While Mr Asano's proclivities are certainly unconventional, they are less... spanking-related.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t seem like his flavour of strange,” she agreed, turning back to the trapped man. She glanced him over, making no move to set him free.

“The Fortress is something of a playground for the rich and powerful,” she explained to the restrained man as she continued to look around the room. “People with the kind of appetites that are best kept discreet in proper society. I was surprised by how common it was for those with what was effectively absolute power to fantasise about being powerless. Never truly powerless, though; they always leave themselves an out. A method of control. Which makes me wonder how you ended up in here, strung up naked and all alone.”

She looked around again, taking particular notice of the thick carpeting.

“It looks like someone shuffled out of here quickly,” she mused, then looked up at the chained man with a grin.

“Oh dear,” she said. “You’ve been playing games with those people you converted, haven’t you? Their independent thinking stripped away and replaced with obedience. You probably gave them instructions on how you like your jollies and when to let you out after. You’d have had some kind of signal to make them release you, too, but something went wrong, didn’t it?”

She laughed as realisation struck.

“The lockdown,” she said. “Your mindless victims are under standing orders to mobilise if a lockdown happens, aren’t they? They must have shuffled off immediately and not seen whatever gesture you use to make them let you out.”

She looked at the man’s face as he stared daggers at her and she laughed again.

“Oh, I’m exactly right.”

She took another glance around the room as she withdrew a bottle of soporific poison from her storage space.

“Are you sure you’re a Church of Purity guy? I love a hypocrite as much as the next girl with a history of blackmail, but this is a lot.”

The dock had been in chaos, which was useful to Belinda. Her original plan had been to purloin one of the submersibles, but with the order members leaderless and in chaos, she revised her ambitions. The order members on the dock had split into two factions, arguing over taking the submersibles and evacuating immediately. The members whose cell leaders never came back from the mining complex wanted to leave, while Marika and Elise's people did not.

As a compromise, they had the neutral and obedient pure converted prepping the vessels for departure, loading in supplies and the most valuable resources quickly available from the dock area. This gave Belinda a chance to shapeshift into a pure converted, mimicking their blank auras as she slipped into each of the vessels, pretending to load goods while really performing sabotage. The hauler submersible, loaded with materials from the mining complex, was a pleasant surprise. Designed to be largely self-operating, she figured out how to delay-trigger it to block off the underwater passage and cover her escape.

Only the submarine she intended to steal went unsabotaged, and she did load something onto it. It was an unconscious man, wrapped up in a very nice blanket and stowed in a crate.

Belinda's greatest stroke of luck came when she finally took off in one of the submersibles. Rather than quickly react to her, the two sides started blaming each other, buying her valuable time to get away.

Belinda had never driven a submersible before, but that proved not to be a problem. She possessed various abilities that allowed her to gain expertise akin to that of a skill book, only temporarily, in various fields. Her Instant Adept ability offered some ranged and agility-based attack options but was the least combat-oriented of that power subset. Its true worth was utility, allowing her to pilot the vessel to an adequate degree and escape from the facility.

“...and that, Clive, is how I got you one of their submersibles,” Belinda finished.

Clive looked out from one of the balconies of the looming temple to scan the lagoon. “Where is it, then?”

“I stashed it, obviously. I don’t want the Adventure Society saying it’s theirs, just because I was on a contract. I stole it fair and square.”

Humphrey gave her a disapproving look. Jason’s team, minus the still-comatose Jason himself, was gathered on a large terrace balcony of Jason’s cloud temple. With them were Rufus and his team, plus Taika and Travis. With everything that had gone on, they were all looking to hunker down, at least until Jason woke up.

“I’m kidding, obviously,” Belinda assured Humphrey. “The submersible sank. I forget where, so there’s no point bothering to look for it and I’m definitely not going to sell it to Clive.”

“Sell?” Clive asked.

Humphrey gave his head an exasperated shake.

“I’m just glad you caught their priest,” Neil said. “Handing him over got them off our back about your mother, Sophie.”

“For now,” Rufus said.

“Perhaps we should try questioning her?” Neil asked. “She’ll probably talk to you, Sophie.”

“Will the cloud house even let us?” Gary asked. “We aren’t even certain where it’s holding her.”

They had mapped out the new configuration of the cloud construct building and found large sections to which they had no access.

“Are we still calling it a house?” Neil asked. “It’s more of... I don’t know, a lair, maybe? That’s what you call where

the villain lives, right?”

“He’s not a villain,” Humphrey insisted.

“He may not have turned the cloud house into the shape of his own head,” Travis said, “but you have to admit Jason has a lot of evil warlock vibes when he gets serious. Taika, you remember when he killed those superheroes with his mind on television? He just looked at them and they died.”

“That was pretty chilling, bro.”

“They were enemies,” Farrah said.

“I’m not saying they weren’t,” Travis said. “But a lot of people in my world are scared of him. I mean, a lot think he’s awesome, all dark powers and mystery, and most people probably think he’s a hero. *I* think he’s a hero. But he’s scary. When you’ve seen him fight armies of monsters and kill people—powerful people—just by looking at them, then even when he’s being friendly, he’s scary. Especially if he’s friendly while you point a gun at him and he’s telling you he’s going to steal the most powerful weapon on the planet. I’m just saying.”

“His essences are fairly sinister,” Neil said. “Blood, dark, sin and doom? His combination sounds like the Adventure Society should hunt him down.”

“That’s hardly a fresh observation,” Rufus said. “His combination is fine. We checked.”

“That’s the thing, though, isn’t it?” Neil said. “I bet you took one look at what he had on hand and rushed to check.”

“That’s true; we did,” Gary admitted. “Most people go their whole lives without stumbling onto an essence and he found three within a few hours of arriving in our world.”

“That’s just because he’s an outworlder,” Rufus said. “They’re all like that.”

“And do all the outworlders get the drinking-baby-blood combination?” Neil asked.

“It doesn’t matter what his powers are,” Dawn said, entering through the door to join them on the large balcony

terrace. “It matters what he does with them.”

Everyone pulled themselves up a little straighter in the presence of the diamond-ranker except Farrah and Humphrey. Farrah had spent months travelling with Jason and Dawn, while Humphrey had been standing straight in the first place.

“The time is drawing close for me to leave this world,” Dawn announced. “Any action I take has the potential of giving the Builder excuses to push the rules yet again.”

“You’re leaving before Jason recovers?” Farrah asked.

“No,” Dawn said. “Jason has made the inevitable spectacle of himself, to a greater degree than even I envisaged. At least until he wakes. I shall reside here in the cloud temple.”

“Temple?” Humphrey said. “That is a very loaded term.”

“Yet it is the one being used in the high-ranking circles, where it matters. It is also not inaccurate.”

“Great, Jason made a temple to himself,” Neil said. “You’d think I’d be surprised, but here we are. How big a mess are we in now?”

“You will all be the focus of powerful forces now,” Dawn said. “My presence alongside you will exacerbate the attention you garner, but there is little point closing the gate once the heidel has already run off. That is an easy trade for the pressure it will shield you from. My presence will make the local powers restrict themselves to putting their eyes on you and not their hands.”

“How long do you think that will work?” Rufus asked.

“Jason will likely be in recovery through the rest of the monster surge and the Builder’s departure,” Dawn said. “I recommend you petition the Adventure Society to allow your team to decamp from Rimaros as soon as Jason is fit to travel. I have a very strong feeling they’ll say yes, and you would do well to put some distance between yourselves and the Sea of Storms for a while. Once Jason can turn the cloud temple into a vehicle, I will be strongly advising him to do exactly that and make use of it.”

“When you go,” Farrah asked, “will we see you again?”

“Yes,” Dawn said, “but not for some years. We need to talk about that before Jason wakes up.”

I'VE TOLD YOU EVERYTHING

“I’M ABOUT TO ASK YOU TO DO SOMETHING,” DAWN SAID. “Before I do, I’m going to need some of you to leave. Clive, Taika and Travis. Rufus, Farrah and Gary. You can’t be here for this and I need you to not ask why.”

Clive looked at Dawn for only a moment before nodding, grabbing Travis by the sleeve and leading him from the room. Farrah and Dawn shared a look. Farrah reluctant but finally nodding as well, followed the others from the terrace.

“What do you think that’s about?” Travis asked, slowing down as the door to the balcony terrace closed behind them.

“If Dawn says we aren’t meant to know, then we aren’t meant to know,” Clive said. “We aren’t going to talk about it and you should do your best to distract yourself so you aren’t wondering about it.”

“Done,” Gary said. “We should start getting lunch ready.”

“We still have some of that argy fruit jam Jason made,” Taika said. “I can go get some scones from the bakery. Most of the people hanging about have gotten bored and left, so it shouldn’t be too crowded.”

“Let me get the scones while you whip the cream,” Gary said. “I always end up with cream in my fur.”

“Bro, what did I tell you about licking the bowl? Use a scraper, not your face.”

“What’s wrong with my face?” Gary asked. “People love my face.”

“It’s pretty big, though. Huge face, small bowl. It’s not tricky to see where you’re going wrong.”

Gary and Taika noticed Travis looking at them, wide-eyed.

“What?” Gary asked.

“Bro, it’s obvious,” Taika told him.

“Oh, right,” Gary said, realising his mistake. “Don’t worry; it won’t just be sweet scones. I’ll get savoury scones too.”

“How are we talking about scones right now?” Travis asked, incredulous.

“Oh,” Farrah said, having her own realisation. “You’re American. You’re getting biscuits and scones mixed up again.”

“You think *that’s* the problem?” Travis asked, then pointed at the closed door to the terrace, the black cloud-stuff completely sealing off any sound. “Whatever they’re talking about in there is really important. Like, fate of the world stuff.”

“Bro, if you’re waiting for things to calm down before eating good food, you’re in the wrong social circle.”

“I’m going into the village with Gary,” Rufus said. “I want some of that herb butter Mrs Marsh makes for the savoury scones.”

Farrah put a reassuring hand on Travis’ shoulder.

“Remember where we met, Travis?”

His shoulders slumped and Farrah gave one of them a consoling pat as he answered her.

“On an army base under attack by vampires while you were stealing a nuclear weapon.”

“Exactly. You can’t drop everything just because there’s a dinosaur invasion or a zombie army or a hole in the side of the universe.”

“Or a bunch of world-shaping doom golems,” Clive added.

“Travis, you know how Jason got in those last days on Earth,” Farrah said. “That’s what happens when you obsess over the job. You have to learn to let go of the things you can’t do anything about, and sometimes even the ones you can. Otherwise, it’ll hollow you out until you can’t help anyone. Even yourself.”

Back on the terrace, Dawn looked at the remainder of Jason’s team.

“What I have to ask of you is not fair,” she said. “And it requires trust I have no way to demonstrate is well-founded. I’m going to tell you what I need and I need you to not ask questions, or respond at all. Do you understand?”

The team showed various levels of confusion and dissatisfaction, but they all nodded silently.

“Thank you. I am going to leave this world, sometime shortly after Jason awakes. The next time you see me, you need to do what I say no questions, no hesitation. No matter who you have to leave behind. You have to get Clive to move with you, along with any other allies you have on hand that you completely trust. Until then, you can’t tell Clive or Jason or even discuss it amongst yourselves. I can’t tell you why and I can’t tell you why I can’t tell you why. I need you to accept it, never talk about it after you leave this room and do your best not to dwell on it at all.”

There was a long moment of silence before someone spoke.

“That’s... pretty uninformative,” Neil said.

“You said ‘no matter who we have to leave behind,’” Humphrey said. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“You’ll like it even less when the time comes,” Dawn said. “But you have to do it.”

“But you can’t tell us why,” Sophie said.

“That’s right,” Dawn said. “It’s a risk even telling you this much, but I want you to be as prepared as you can be.”

“How do we prepare for something we know nothing about?” Humphrey asked.

“You get stronger. When the time comes, if you aren’t gold rank, your chances go from small to none.”

“Chances at what?” Belinda asked.

“At something you will attempt regardless of what I say here,” Dawn said. “There is only a very slender opening for even the potential of success, and I am trying to help you thread that needle.”

“How long do we have to get ready?” Humphrey asked.

“More than a decade. Less than two.”

“That’s feasible,” Humphrey said. “Not easy, but with sufficient dedication, it can be done. It doesn’t leave time for other pursuits.”

“No,” Dawn said. “You need to be adventurers, and only adventurers.”

“What do we tell Jason and Clive? They won’t go more than ten years without noticing us push.”

“Tell them it’s something you need them to do and you can’t tell them why. It’s an unpleasant task, I can assure you, but a necessary one. They trust you and will go along.”

“Why?” Neil asked. “I know you said not to ask, but what does the World-Phoenix get out of this?”

“The World-Phoenix has an interest in Jason Asano because he is helping its agenda. That interest has protected Asano from other forces that would otherwise involve themselves with him. His lack of power, relative to the scope of events he has become a reluctant participant in, make him a valuable game piece. The moment the World-Phoenix is done with him, that protection ends. That’s when you’ll see me again, acting not on behalf of the World-Phoenix but myself. At that moment, you will need to be gold rank or you won’t

qualify to even try and help him. Diamond rank would be better, but gold will at least allow you to set foot on the path.”

Dawn frowned.

“I’ve already said more than I intended. Every word I share with you is a danger. I’m going to go, but I hope you forget what I’ve told you today.”

“You haven’t told us anything,” Sophie said.

“I’ve told you everything,” Dawn said. “That’s why you cannot share any of this, especially with Clive and Jason. They will likely see through my evasions and bring disaster. Do *not* speak of this with Clive. Don’t even tell Jason this discussion took place. I’ll say again: do not even discuss this with each other. Do your best to not dwell on what I’ve told you at all and focus on growing stronger.”

Dawn didn’t even bother to use the door, leaving via the balcony as flaming wings appeared on her back before she shot away through the air.

Belinda wandered over to the balcony and looked out, the diamond-ranker already gone.

“What in the sweet teats of the lizard goddess was that about?”

“No,” Jason said, in the feeble voice of an old man. “The clown is the bad guy.”

Gordon’s orbs flickered in a rapid blue and orange strobe, gently pulsing both aura and light. Jason wasn’t sure if he could understand it because his language ability had undergone a second evolution or if his bond with Gordon was stronger, but he didn’t especially care. The answer would be somewhere in the slate of system messages waiting for him when he had woken up. He’d immediately pushed them aside, more interested in seeing his familiars who had immediately emerged in his waking.

He had tried to will the cloud house to turn his bed into a reclining chair, but the moment he attempted to circulate mana in his body, it was racked with pain. He was left lying in the cloud bed, his head sticking out like he was in a bubble bath, except all the bubbles were black. Shade and Gordon floated over him while Colin's blood-clone form sat on the edge of the bed.

Colin had let out a nails-on-a-chalkboard alien screech.

"I know you have been, buddy," Jason told him, feebly patting the familiar's arm. "You're always a good boy."

Gordon had started flickering his orbs in the strange light-aura code language, wanting to encourage Jason with his favourite movie.

"Still with this?" Jason asked. "The clown is not the hero. He's an interdimensional entity that eats people."

He looked at Colin and Gordon.

"I'm talking to the wrong people about this. Shade, back me up."

"I haven't seen the film," Shade said. "Is Ralph Fiennes in it?"

"No," Jason said.

"That's a shame," Shade said. "I like Ralph Fiennes. It always feels like he's playing a butler, even when he isn't."

"Of course it does," Jason said. "What's his actual last name again?"

"Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes," Shade said. "I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Does that family line have its own Wikipedia page for being excessively British?"

"It is not for being excessively British," Shade said. "It may be true that they adopted the name through an Act of Parliament, but that is hardly the point. More importantly, were you going through my browser history?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Jason said.

He gently moved his head to look around the room. It was a plain black cube with a plain black bed in it.

The cloud house had taken on darker iterations before and Jason could replace the white with a black motif offset by bright blue and orange. He generally preferred the pastel sunset colours, however. This new monochrome black was not to his taste, but if a chair gave him trouble, he wasn't about to try and reshape the whole house.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “You have some rather anxious visitors. Shall I open the door?”

“I don't know if I'm up to that,” Jason said. “I'm not feeling so—”

“Gary has scones.”

“Well, of course, they can come in. Wait, am I naked?”

“...and then the submersible mysteriously sank and I have no idea what happened to it,” Belinda explained.

“It mysteriously sank?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Belinda confirmed, conspicuously jerking her head in Humphrey's direction. “I definitely only used it as an escape vessel and did not stash it away to sell to Clive.”

“I just said I was interested in taking a look,” Clive said. “I am not buying a stolen submarine.”

“Good, because I definitely don't have one,” Belinda said.

“I'm sorry I was too laid up to come help with the Purity stronghold.”

“Yeah,” Neil said. “We're off doing all the work while you're spending the whole week taking a nap. Talk about lazy.”

Jason's chuckle quickly turned into a pained grunt. “Ow. Not loving the whole pathetically feeble situation I have going on here.”

“My mother and Carlos Quilido will be here in not too long,” Rufus said.

“Carlos is in town? Liara called him in? It’s nice when people in power actually listen to your suggestions.”

“Perhaps the trick is for your suggestions to be something other than shoving things into places they do not want those things shoved,” Humphrey pointed out.

“There’s probably something in that.”

“They aren’t here now because all that can help you at this point is rest,” Neil said. “They and the rest of a full Church of the Healer contingent are working on Gibson Amouz.”

“You got him out alive, then?” Jason asked. “But worse for wear, from the sounds of it. Did the bad guys do their creepy purification thing on him?”

“They were in the process when we found him,” Clive said. “An early stage, so far as anyone can tell. That ritual they were using was fiendishly complex. Just figuring out how to stop it without killing him immediately was no small challenge.”

“How long did it take him?” Jason asked.

“Nine minutes,” Sophie said.

“So you say,” Neil said bitterly. “I still think it was ten, but it was your boyfriend checking the watch.”

“Lost a bet?” Jason asked.

Neil grumbled instead of giving a response.

“I will not have my integrity impugned,” Humphrey said.

“Was that even your watch?” Neil asked. “That didn’t look like your watch.”

“No,” Humphrey said. “Sophie gave me one she got from Beli—”

Sophie’s hand clamped over Humphrey’s mouth.

“It was a perfectly normal watch,” she said.

FAITH IS SOUL-DEEP

“EVERYONE OUT,” ARABELLE SAID, USHERING THE TEAM FROM Jason’s room as Carlos approached the cloud bed.

“Good to see you,” Jason told him.

“I heard it was Princess Liara’s idea to call me in,” Carlos told him. “That was good thinking. I’ve been aware of the Order of Redeeming Light’s methods for a while, and those of us in my specialty field have always had some questions. When the Church of Purity was still in good standing, we never had a chance to explore them.”

“How is the Amouz kid?”

“About forty years old, to start,” Carlos said. “Not sure how that qualifies as a kid to you.”

“Right now, I feel about three hundred. What exactly is wrong with me?”

“Neil didn’t tell you?” Arabelle asked.

“It was more of a friendly catch-up,” Jason said. “Also, there were baked goods. You don’t want someone explaining gross medical stuff while they have a dollop of cream on their nose. If I’ve been in a coma for days without healing up, I’m guessing recovery will give me more than enough time for the ugly details.”

“I’ll examine you as we explain,” Arabelle said. “Carlos, would you lift him up to rest atop the cloud bed instead of inside it?”

“Now, hold on,” Jason said. “I’m in the nicky-noo. You lift me on top of the bed and the fruit bowl will be on full display.”

Nestled in the cloud bed like a bubble bath, the only thing Jason wore was his necklace with his magic amulet and the cloud flask attached to it.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before,” Arabelle said. “Who do you think got rid of what was left of your clothes?”

“Humphrey?” Jason suggested with optimism he didn’t feel.

Carlos snorted a laugh as he plunged his arms into the cloud bed and under Jason, gently raising him up.

Arabelle moved a wand back and forth over Jason’s body. Carlos and Arabelle watched closely as the wand’s crystal tip shifted between several colours while throwing up illusory symbols that floated in the air briefly before vanishing. Carlos took out a notebook and pencil, recording the symbols.

“You’re a lucky man, Jason,” Carlos said as he continued taking notes. “You had your familiar and Mr Standish draining your mana, with your cloud house siphoning some away as well. Your leech familiar helped keep your body from breaking down while your... whatever the glowing one is, initiated a final purge that managed to save you at the very last minute. The only reason you survived that last ritual was swift thinking on the part of your team’s healer. Only his well-timed use of a non-healing ability allowed you to endure it. Even all of that wouldn’t have worked for anyone else. The last thing that managed to hold you together was your extremely unusual nature.”

“The physical-spiritual gestalt thing?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Arabelle said. “That was your true saviour. If your body and soul were still in a binary state, the degradation of your body’s magical matrix would have been much more severe. Because your soul and your body—or more precisely, your body’s magical matrix—are now the same thing, the

integrity of your body's magical matrix is breathtakingly robust.”

“It should be indestructible,” Carlos said. “The meat you're made up of is the only real vulnerability you have. The fact that you managed to damage your magical matrix when it's an extension of your soul is... Jason, I can't even begin to explain the magnitude to which you underestimated how destructive what you did to yourself was. Using whatever that power source was is one thing, but what you used it *for*? A half-finished power enhancer that you don't fully understand? You should be a puddle on the floor of a room in a mine buried under a kilometre of ocean.”

“It was that bad?”

“Jason, unlike most people, your soul and the magical matrix of your body are not two separate things. The magical matrix is always robust, but the soul is inviolable; that should make your matrix inviolable as well. I've seen the same thing with messengers, who are like you in this regard.”

Carlos let out a sigh before continuing.

“You can hurt a soul. You can scrape around the outside and cause excruciating torment, as you know better than most. But unless the will caves in, you cannot violate it to cause any genuine damage. Again, something you should understand more than almost anyone.”

“Your body matrix is the magical framework your body is slung over,” Arabelle said. “Like a skeleton that doesn't exist, but you'll die if it isn't there.”

“Your body is mostly the same as anyone else's,” Carlos added. “It's very hard to damage anyone's magical matrix, but yours should be utterly impervious to harm unless you open yourself up to damage.”

“Which is exactly what you did when you tried to use whatever half-finished modification you and Clive did to your cloud flask,” Arabelle continued. “Jason, destroying your body is easy, but doing the same to your body matrix is essentially impossible. Please stop doing impossible things.”

Jason winced.

“Is that the tone you use when Rufus has been a naughty boy?”

“Jason,” Carlos said, while Arabelle scowled, pausing the back and forth motion of the wand. “Do you remember how I used what I learned from what happened to you to study the effects of star seeds, so we could improve our methods of dealing with them?”

“Sure. Did it actually help?”

“It did. And I’d like to—”

“That’s enough, Carlos,” Arabelle chided. “Let’s make sure he’s genuinely in recovery before we start turning him into an experiment.”

“Wait, what experiment?” Jason asked. “I think I’d be more comfortable if someone pushed me back down into the bed now, please.”

Jason had managed, very gently and very slowly, to shift the cloud bed into a heavily reclined chair. Moving mana through his body for any magical task was painful. There would always be a level of pain from the mana naturally circulating through any magical body, but now any time he actively used it, the pain massively spiked.

After thoroughly examining him, Arabelle and Carlos concluded that Jason should use his mana to the greatest degree he could tolerate. Wherever mana was actively circulating through his body matrix, they saw a marginal but detectable acceleration in his recovery rate.

Having completed their examination, Arabelle left. Both healers had more than enough on their plate and hovering over Jason was not productive. Arabelle especially was a mental health specialist and Jason did not seem excessively troubled on that front. Compared to when she had first arrived in Rimaros, the crippled Jason was much healthier, from her

perspective, than the powerhouse adventurer fresh from a domineering victory over the Builder's forces.

Carlos did not leave with her, having something to discuss with Jason. Jason gritted his teeth through the pain as he slowly had the cloud house form a chair for Carlos. Partway through, he gave up on a full chair and went with a small stool instead.

"That's good," Carlos said as he sat down. "Push things when you can, but don't let yourself get down about things not going faster. We—meaning students of healing magic—have a very limited understanding of how someone like you works. That's why I'd like to work with you through recovery, the way I did after the star seed. To see what I can learn that might help us."

"This is about the messengers, isn't it?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Carlos said. "The Adventure Society is actively suppressing the news, but it turns out that the grand summoning your team interrupted was just one of many. Yours wasn't even the only team to interrupt one. But the Church of Purity had many more people than anyone realised. They have hidden pockets of worshippers across the world and the messenger forces they managed to summon are not inconsiderable. Until the monster surge is over, authorities are actively hiding this fact."

"That's a little different to before," Jason said. "Studying the star seed was to help people recover after they were also implanted. You're talking about studying my body as it recovers for potential vulnerabilities. So you can better hurt people like them. And like me."

"Not exactly," Carlos said. "I'm a priest of the Healer and I don't seek out pathways to cause harm. But any insights I can gain into potential vulnerabilities in the course of recovery will be greatly valued by everyone who *isn't* a priest of the Healer."

"You sound like a man looking for a loophole," Jason said. "Purity worshippers have been more than a little hypocritical, working with the Builder and some of the other things they've been up to. Is that the example you want to follow?"

“It’s odd you should say that, given what I’ve learned during your coma. But with respect, Jason, don’t presume to tell me what my god is and is not.”

“That’s between you and your boss,” Jason acknowledged. “But I seem to recall your church having a problem with clergy going astray. He kicked out the whole roster, back in Greenstone. Neil was the only one who stood up to them, which is what made me want him for our team. He was all they had left and he’s a low-rank adventuring priest, not active clergy. They had to portal in replacements.”

“Things are not that simple, Jason.”

“They never are,” Jason said. “If I’ve learned anything over the last few years, it’s that any given thing is more complicated than I realise, and most of what I know about it is wrong. Also, I’ve learned how to kill things with magic powers. So, if I’ve learned any *two* things over the last few... well, you get it.”

“I’m not unaware of what you’re describing,” Carlos said. “But the Healer encompasses every aspect of healing. That includes a comprehensive understanding of the ways people can be broken. It isn’t the task of our church to act on it, but the gods are not wholly individual, Jason. The God of Healing and the God of War are not enemies; they’re brothers.”

“I don’t like the idea of those brothers working together to find better ways to kill me.”

“It’s not about you, Jason.”

“No? Then go experiment on the next spiritual-physical gestalt bloke you come across.”

“I already have.”

“I’m guessing that the messengers aren’t big on volunteering for ‘better ways to kill them’ experiments.”

“They are not.”

“Do you even believe you can find something that will work, Carlos? Wasn’t the whole point of this that I did this damage to myself? That’s the only way real soul damage can

happen, right? Is your plan to produce spirit bombs that look like fruit and start slipping them into the messengers' packed lunches? I don't see that working out."

"We don't know what will work, Jason. That's why I want to do this. The messengers are only a part of what Purity has prepared, but they seem to be the largest part and they are incredibly powerful. Very few magical beings even come close to an essence user of the same rank, but messengers do."

"They're that strong?"

"They don't have as many powers as we do, but they have a lot. And because their power is inherent, their entire population naturally becomes vastly powerful. It's the reason for their famous arrogance as a species. This entire invasion force is high-ranking. They don't have anything like the numbers our entire world can array against them, but even their rank and file are silver. They have no shortage of gold-rankers, and while there aren't any confirmed diamonds yet, we believe they're either out there now or will be. We're certain that there are still mass-summoning projects we have yet to detect and have yet to be enacted. Before the monster surge is over and their window for mass-summoning closes, they will be."

Jason frowned, contemplating, but didn't say anything.

"Jason, their numbers are significant. We need every edge we can get."

"I still don't know, Carlos. You're asking me to let you study me to find the best way of killing me."

"Jason, I think there's a lot more going on here than we realise. Not just with the messengers, but the Church of Purity as a whole. I haven't discussed this with anyone yet, because of the dire ramifications, but I hope it will help you understand the importance of what's going on."

Jason didn't bother explaining that his personal scale of what constituted important was massively out of balance after preventing the astral annihilation of Earth not once but twice.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

“The days you spent waking up, I spent examining the Order of Redeeming Light members. The ones who have been through what they egregiously call their purification ritual, as well as Gibson Amouz, who went through a part of it.”

“How is he?”

“About where you were when you and I first met.”

“Well, you helped me. I’m sure you can do the same for him.”

“Thank you for the faith. But back to the topic at hand, I’ve also examined the people implanted with these ‘purified’ clockwork cores. What I’m finding across the board is disturbing on a scale so large that just the scope of it makes it seem implausible.”

“You just described the last four years of my life,” Jason said. “I may be the best sounding board you’ll get.”

Carlos looked at Jason, uncertain, before nodding to himself.

“There’s something profoundly wrong with what the Order of Redeeming Light is doing, Jason. Not just morally, which is obvious, but on a deeper level. That so-called purification ritual isn’t anything of the sort. I’ve had the chance to dig into it because of what happened to Gibson Amouz. His state, like yours, has given me a chance to gain insights that aren’t possible with those who have fully gone through the process.”

“And you found something even more worrying than what we already knew?”

“This purification ritual is some kind of extremely modified lesser vampire curse. Altered beyond recognition unless you really get in and look, and even then, I’m not entirely certain. I need to examine the Order of Redeeming Light members more, based on what I’ve learned from Amouz. I’m confident, but the changes are extreme to the point of no longer retaining any practical resemblance to vampirism. It doesn’t even prevent the use of essences and it can even affect not just living things but almost anything with magic.”

“Does that mean it doesn’t change the soul?” Jason asked. “Lesser vampirism hijacks the entire body, but if you kill them, the soul goes free, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a way to remove the effects without killing them?”

“I don’t know. It’s been a few days and I’m still working with postulation as much as anything. It will take months, probably years of research to answer that kind of question. You’re missing the important point, though.”

“And what’s that?”

“The Order of Redeeming Light. I told you before that people in my field have always had questions about them. They appear to have a way to forcibly convert worshippers, which shouldn’t be possible. A fully converted lesser vampire will obey any order up to and including killing itself. The only exception is that you can’t force them to open up their souls, because the vampirism doesn’t go that deep. Faith is soul-deep as well. You can make someone pretend to worship, but they won’t really do it. It’ll just be performance.”

“You’re saying they aren’t genuine worshippers of Purity? That it’s an act?”

“This ritual that changes them isn’t purification, but the exact opposite. It’s a taint. Clearly, unambiguously and objectively a taint.”

“Yeah, the God of Purity is a hypocrite. This is not news.”

“Yes, Jason, it is. A god losing their way and using specious arguments to justify circumventing their own principles is one thing. Religious tales are rife with stories about this—usually about the gods of other religions. A god directly and unambiguously contravening their core identity is another thing entirely. We mortals might have rules, but gods *are* rules. They are intricately connected to the concepts they embody. They can’t go directly against their central principle, no matter how much they might weasel around it.”

“But you’re saying that’s what the God of Purity is doing.”

“So it would seem.”

“What does that even mean?” Jason asked, processing everything Carlos had just explained. “Are you saying that the God of Purity somehow isn’t the God of Purity?”

“Yes, Jason. That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

LEST HE BECOME A MONSTER HIMSELF

“YOU’RE SAYING THE GOD OF PURITY IS PULLING A WIZARD of Oz?” Jason asked. He was reclined in a cloud chair while Carlos sat facing him on a cloud stool.

“I don’t know what that means,” Carlos said.

“It means there’s no actual god and it’s just some bloke in a booth.”

“No, Jason; it’s not some person in a booth.”

“It would be tricky running an entire branch of a religion on hand puppets and doing a funny voice,” Jason acknowledged. “Who’s behind the curtain, then? It wasn’t the Builder the whole time, was it? That would be convoluted and counter-productive in the extreme.”

“That isn’t possible,” Carlos said.

“So? I do impossible stuff all the time. Are you saying a great astral being is worse than me? Actually, the Builder is, now that I think about it. That guy sucks.”

“Jason, you should take this seriously.”

Jason burst out laughing, which quickly turned into a pain-stricken groan.

“Nope,” he croaked.

Carlos frowned but continued.

“It has to be one of the deception gods,” he explained. “There are several of them, but the most likely candidates are Deceit and Disguise.”

“There’s a god just for disguises? That must be a pretty minor god.”

“Disguise is a minor god, but with a more comprehensive field of influence than it may seem at first. Disguise is the god pertaining to masking one thing as another. From disguises to poisoned drinks to counterfeit spirit coins, Disguise is the lord of illusion, manipulating assumptions and walking unnoticed in plain sight.”

“And you think the god Disguise has disguised himself as Purity?”

“I don’t think anyone else could, except perhaps one of the other deception gods.”

“And the other gods didn’t notice this going on?”

“I told you about the interconnectedness of the gods. That Healer is brother to War.”

“That’s a metaphor, right? They don’t actually have a mum or anything, right?”

“That is correct. The gods, even those antagonistic to one another, are all part of a complex interplay. They have rules, governing not just themselves and their areas of influence but how they relate to one another. If the god of disguises chooses to take on a disguise, even Knowledge or Truth cannot reveal it.”

“But they’re Knowledge and Truth. Isn’t that their whole thing?”

“It’s complicated, as I described. Gods must be able to act within their sphere of influence without others simply negating it or it becomes a dangerous clash between the forces that govern reality. This is why the gods are bound by convoluted limitations.”

“Okay, but doesn’t that suggest that half the gods could be a scam? What if most of them don’t even exist and it’s just a small handful of them mucking about? The whole pantheon could be one guy with the world’s most over-elaborate puppet show.”

“There are rules that govern these things. Profoundly complicated ones. Every faith has its priests study the nuances of how the gods relate to one another. It’s extremely complicated and nuanced. Deities have limitations that don’t make sense to mortal sensibilities. What gods can do is impossible to the likes of us, but most people don’t realise that the reverse is also true. The gods are the forces that govern our reality. We have freedoms in our relative weakness that are as unattainable to them as stopping the sun from rising is impossible to us. Understanding those limitations is a field of study that people sink lifetimes into.”

“And you’ve undertaken that kind of study?”

“I’ve dabbled. Every priest has at least some grounding in it. The point is that the relationships between the gods and the ways in which they balance each other out can be difficult to decipher.”

“Is this you taking a long time to say that you have no idea what’s happening?”

“No,” Carlos said. “I think that I do know what’s happening. I just need you to understand that gods don’t relate to one another in the same ways that mortals do.”

“Sure. I’ve dealt with Knowledge a bit, and seen that she has rules about what she can and can’t tell people, even though she knows everything.”

“That’s a very pertinent example, but I’ll come back to that. The Ecumenical Council was convened by the churches to judge the behaviour of the Church of Purity once their collusion with the cult of the Builder came to light. From there, it became increasingly clear that the church had been operating well outside their own dictates, and had been for some time.”

“You’re only talking about churches, not gods,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Carlos said. “Because of the nature of divine interaction, it is always simpler to act using mortals as proxies. This is one of the key roles of every church. But I think there is more to it than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Ecumenical Council discovered that the Purity church’s improprieties had been escalating over decades. Perhaps even centuries.”

Jason thought about the intervention in his own world, centuries in the past.

“That makes sense,” he said.

“I have come to believe that one of the reasons that the churches were acting instead of the gods is that the gods had already dealt with Purity quite some time ago. You’re familiar with the concept of sanctioning?”

“I know it’s something transcendent beings do instead of killing. Beyond that, I have no idea.”

“No one does, but that understanding is enough for this explanation. I think that the gods may have already sanctioned Purity long before you or I were even born. But some rule, like what you described about the limits on what Knowledge could share, prevented the gods from telling their clergy what happened.”

“Wouldn’t the Purity people notice their god was missing? Also, Purity is still around. Lots of people have seen him in person when he manifests in temple districts across the whole planet. You think it was that deception god the whole time? Disguise, right?”

“Or perhaps Deceit. Either way, for the other gods to inform their clergy or the population at large would encroach on the domain of the deception god. Therefore, they would have been unable to do so.”

“And they what? Need someone like you to figure it out, because you’re a mortal? You aren’t bound to the same strictures and can shout it from the rooftops?”

“Exactly,” Carlos said. “I’m convinced that I’m right, but I’m afraid of the ramifications. Just the Purity church being brought low was a massive upheaval. If the people realise that the gods knew that Purity was not even Purity for their entire lives, I don’t know what will happen.”

“And people aren’t likely to respond well to an explanation that it’s very complicated and nuanced. They’ll start making snap judgements based on bad assumptions and whatever unscrupulous lies people tell that sound like simple answers.”

“The dark gods will do very well from this, yes,” Carlos said. “I do not like the idea of my actions serving the God of Discord.”

“But you’re a healer,” Jason told him. “You know that sometimes you have to cut the bad parts away before the good parts can recover.”

“Yes.”

“What does the disguise god get out of this?”

“Many gods are antagonistic to one another and fall largely into two camps. One camp is made up of gods whose temples and churches you find anywhere in the world there are people. The others are the gods whose priests dwell in the hidden places. Gods who you pray to not because of something you want, but something you want to avoid. Pain, Discord, Deceit.”

“And these are the ones who make out great over this.”

“Yes. Discord, in particular.”

“So, it’s all bad news.”

“Not entirely,” Carlos said. “Now that I know what has been happening, I also see what the other gods have been doing. Knowledge knows more than any of the other gods, and while she cannot share what she knows, she has been raising forces in secret across the world, without even telling them what they are doing or why. This came to light only after people started investigating the Purity church and found Knowledge kept having her forces in the same locations. It was one of the things that helped me put the pieces together.”

“Using a loophole to drop clues,” Jason said. “All these god rules make them seem like lawyers. American lawyers.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“So, what about the actual God of Purity?” Jason asked. “I heard that if a god got sanctioned, a new one would come into being to fill the void.”

“That is my understanding as well,” Carlos said, “but now we are into the realm where historical record gives way to myth and legend. Even assuming that a new god will appear, we have no idea how long that process takes. It could be a thousand years. Ten thousand years.”

“That’s encouraging,” Jason said. “Good luck dealing with all that. I’m glad it’s none of my affair.”

“Not your affair?” Carlos asked. “The entire point of explaining all this is to show you how important it is that we do everything possible to deal with whatever this deception god has planned.”

“You mean poking me with a stick while I heal up so you can find better ways to kill me.”

“To deal with the messengers, Jason.”

“They aren’t my responsibility.”

“How can you listen to everything I just said and choose to not act when there is something you can contribute?”

“Oh, I’ll contribute. As an adventurer. I’ll be happy to take any sensible contract to handle threats appropriate for silver-rankers to confront. But that’s it. I’m not going to let you help people design methods to more effectively murder me.”

“You’re a part of this, Jason. The church has come for you already.”

“Yes, I’ve been involved peripherally with the Purity church’s affairs, but I’m still on the outside of this fight. Purity—or whoever it is—may have accepted a contract hit on me, but it’s clear at this point that his peons were more interested in using me as a distraction. They don’t care about me; they’re running out the clock until the Builder leaves, paying lip service to coming after me without ever seeing it through. They don’t care about me.”

“Jason, you have what is probably the leader of the Order of Redeeming Light somewhere in this building.”

“I have my friend’s mum somewhere in this building.”

“You are in this fight, Jason, and if you think you’re not, you should be. The fact that you have anything to contribute means that you have the responsibility to do so.”

Anger clouded Jason’s expression.

“Don’t talk to me about responsibility, Carlos. I’m not responsible for dealing with your gods. I’m a silver-ranker and I’ve done my part standing up to even worse than gods. I’ve saved a planet. Twice. And it’ll be once more before it stops trying to crack like an egg and disintegrate into the astral.”

Jason’s voice grew stronger, anger pushing him through the pain.

“I’ve fought the Builder with a knife to stop a bunch of giant terraforming robots from wiping out a city full of people and kicking off an interdimensional invasion three years early. I’ve saved tens of thousands of lives directly, and billions, if you count the world I keep saving. My soul has looked into the infinite and been pitted against an entity of such magnitude that the mortal mind lacks the capacity to comprehend its nature, let alone scope.”

Jason gritted his teeth, choking off a grunt of pain as he pushed himself to sit up straight to look directly at Carlos.

“I understand ramifications of what’s at play here. I understand stakes and challenges. At this stage, a rogue counterfeit god tops out at ‘not great’ on my personal threat scale and I’ll say this again: I’m a silver-ranker. Yes, I’ve been dragged into situations where I was the only one there to stand up and do the job, and I’ve bugged it up a lot. But I did it because I was the only guy who could or would. But this time, there are other people who can and will. People who aren’t just some silver-ranker, and I am just some guy this time, Carlos. I’m not *the* guy, which is a refreshing change. I loved the idea of being the hero right up until I was.”

“Not being at the centre of events doesn’t abrogate your responsibility to do what you can, Jason. As hard as it is, you don’t get to shirk that responsibility.”

Jason sucked in a sharp, furious hiss of breath.

“Shirk my responsibility? I fought the Builder, Carlos. I fought him, I won, and I died doing it. And I’ve fought this order of Purity or whoever’s really behind the curtain, and I’m lying here having almost died for my trouble again. You told me yourself that it should have killed me. I’m going to repeat myself one more time, Carlos, because it doesn’t seem to be sinking in: I’m a silver-ranker. Can you look me in the eye and tell me that it’s my responsibility to fight armies of angels and a global network of fanatic terrorists?”

“Yes,” Carlos said. “Because you can. If you have the power to do something that can help, you have a moral obligation to do it.”

Carlos stood as the stool he was sitting on suddenly sank into the floor. Jason’s cloud chair did the same, tipping him into a standing position.

“Jason, don’t—”

“Shut up,” Jason snarled as he staggered, struggling to stay on his feet. He managed to stop stumbling and stand unsteadily in place, his alien eyes burning as they stared at Carlos. Jason ignored his nakedness, his body a pasty and emaciated wreckage. The scars covering his torso stood starkly prominent against his unnaturally pale skin.

“Jason, you need to—”

“You think I haven’t done enough?” Jason asked, his voice tomb-quiet. “You’re accusing me of shirking my responsibilities? Ask your friend Arabelle what I’ve done. Ask Farrah. Ask your damn god; I bet he knows all about it.”

Jason’s voice was building as he talked through teeth gritted against the pain. His body was too weak to stand and he was circulating mana to stay upright, fighting through the pain using distilled rage as fuel.

“Jason, you have a chance to contribute—”

“You think I haven’t paid enough?” Jason asked, his words coming not just from his mouth but vibrating from the air around them. “Do you remember how we met, Carlos? Why you’re in this room? Can you not see what’s in front of your eyes?”

Blue and orange light started gathering in the air behind Jason as blood started leaking from his eyes, still locked onto the healer. Carlos felt Jason’s aura rising, but it wasn’t coming from Jason himself. It came from everywhere, like a rising tide, and Jason’s voice rose with it. His aura battered against Carlos, who struggled to fend it off even with his gold-rank aura.

“Jason, you’re hurting yourself.”

“I always am. I owe you a lot for helping me when I needed it the most. But that also means you’ve seen just part of the price I’ve paid for living up to my responsibilities. Look at me, Carlos. Look at the person you’re asking to give more than he already has. Look at what it’s done to me and look at what’s left. You want to use me again because of what I had to become in order to live up to that responsibility you keep talking about.”

“Jason, you need to lie down.”

“LOOK AT WHAT I AM!”

Jason’s words were carried on a wave of aura with actual physical force. It struck Carlos like a bat hitting a ball, bouncing him off a wall of black cloud-stuff suddenly hard as stone. While the impact was nothing to a gold-ranker, he was profoundly astonished and fell sprawled to the floor. Looking up in shock, he saw that Jason had collapsed.

In the air above Jason’s fallen form, the blue and orange light that had been gathering behind him had coalesced into an eye the size of a wagon. Carlos had seen it come into being just as the aura had thrown him across the room and he still felt its gaze on him. The room’s aura closed on Carlos, squeezing him like a fist, but only for a moment before the eye started to dissipate. It swiftly dispersed into nothing and the force it exuded vanished with it, releasing its grip on Carlos.

Carlos pushed himself to his feet, hurrying to examine Jason. He was unconscious, bleeding from his eyes and all of his scars as if they were fresh wounds. The room's savage aura dimmed enough that Carlos felt other presences in the room. He stood and turned to face them.

The sinister shadow figure was the most ordinary of Jason's three familiars, all of whom were now lined up in front of him. The blood clone looked like Jason but, to Carlos' aura senses, it felt less like a living thing than an unfathomable chasm of depthless hunger.

As for the last familiar, it was an empty cloak draped over a smaller version of the same eye that had just vanished from the room. Carlos sensed something utterly alien, even compared to the ravening leech monster disguised as Jason. It felt to Carlos as if physical reality itself was an affront to the entity, as if it might annihilate the world for having the temerity to exist.

It lacked anything close to the power to accomplish such a thing, just as the leech monster could not devour every living thing on the planet, despite feeling like that was its very purpose. The three familiars were all imposing on him with their auras, only silver rank but somehow combined and magnified by the cloud temple around him.

People had been calling Jason's abode a cloud temple since its very public transformation, but that was because of its appearance. Carlos had paid it minimal mind, even after experiencing the aura inside. Now, however, he felt it. He wasn't in a place; he was in a territory. It belonged to someone on a level deeper than he could fathom and he had made that person it belonged to angry.

"It is time for you to go, Priest Quilido," Shade told him.

"I need to help him," Carlos said, pointing at Jason on the floor.

"You've helped enough," Shade said. "You took a man who has already paid the price for giving more than he had and you told him to give even more. Mr Asano has been working with Madam Remore to recover from living up to the

responsibilities he took on when no one else would. It is unbecoming of a clergyman of the Healer to undo her work.”

Shade raised an arm in Jason’s direction and a cloud bed rose from the floor, picking up Jason. Colin adjusted him so he was lying comfortably.

“I was wondering if I could do that,” Shade said. “I hesitated to experiment, with Mr Asano so weak and the building being connected to him.”

He turned back to Carlos.

“You need to leave before I start testing just how much control I can exert over this building. Go, and direct Madam Remore here at her earliest opportunity.”

Carlos looked at the three familiars. He could feel the hostility pouring from all of them, somehow combined and magnified by the building. With a final glance at Jason, he walked to the door leading out of the room.

“Priest Quilido,” Shade called after him. “Do be thorough in explaining to Madam Remore what you have done here.”

QUITE A LOT OF SYSTEM WINDOWS

CARLOS SAT ON A PEW, HEAD IN HIS HANDS. HE FELT A WARM hand rest on his shoulder.

“You aren’t expected to be perfect, Carlos.”

“I hurt a man I was there to help because I was pushing him to help me kill, whatever I might have told him. And myself. What kind of a priest does that make me?”

“A human one. The power you wield might have changed you, Carlos, but you are still a mortal man. It’s not unforgivable to be selfish or to make mistakes. What you have to do now is no secret; accept what you’ve done, make amends as best you can and strive to do better, having learned from the experience.”

“He threw me across a room. With his aura. That’s something they can do.”

“Is that why you pushed him so hard? Because he’s like them?”

“I know he’s not one of them.”

“In your head, yes. But your heart?”

“I’m afraid that I’m going to lose my way.”

“A fear that you and Jason Asano share. Perhaps, if you can put aside your feelings about the messengers, you can help each other find the paths you need to take.”

Carlos looked around at the church service room, empty other than himself.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Jason awoke, minimising the system windows that joined the others he had pushed aside the last time he came to after passing out somewhere. He was back in a cloud bed while Arabelle watched over him from an armchair.

“If you keep mothering me,” he said in an achy croak, “then I’m going to have to marry Rufus.”

“He could do better.”

Jason laughed, bracing for the pain but found it surprisingly mild. In fact, he felt much better than he had before passing out.

“We told you that circulating your mana would accelerate recovery,” she told him. “We perhaps should have said don’t do it until you pass out, though.”

“I kind of hauled off on Carlos.”

“Do you feel bad about that?”

“Nope.”

“He’s a good man, but he gets caught up in looking to the future. If he sees a way to do good tomorrow, he sometimes overlooks the pain it takes today to get there.”

“I suppose I should be grateful he sees me as an agent instead of a victim. But he seemed pushier than what I remember. More driven. Has he run into the messengers before?”

“Yes. He lost people.”

Jason nodded.

“I know he’s trying to do what’s right. I also know how easy it is to convince yourself that you know what’s right better than everyone else. I’ve hurt people making that mistake as well.”

“You seem well-balanced,” Arabelle told him. “I was worried that you would regress.”

“I’m a little fragile,” Jason said. “But not like I was. If that conversation had come right after I got back from Earth, that would be a different story. But he poked a healing wound, not an open one.”

“I’m glad. But you and I are going to talk about this at length, later.”

“I know. But I’m guessing you’re busy with those Order of Redeeming Light people.”

“Yes. Carlos has been trying to figure out how to undo what has been done to them without killing them.”

“How is that going?”

“It’s not. Trying to undo that kind of conversion, be it vampirism, vorger flesh abominations or anything else is something the Church of the Healer has pursued for centuries. Maybe millennia.”

“Maybe he’ll learn something from these order members or Gibson Amouz that can finally crack it. Better chasing that than ways to kill messengers.”

Arabelle nodded her firm agreement. “I spoke briefly to Carlos about this, and will do so again. But I would appreciate you doing so as well. You know the feeling of having lost your way in the pursuit of worthwhile goals.”

Jason nodded. “‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions,’ is the saying in my world. I’ll do what I can, but I could just make things worse.”

“He’s a little like you,” she said. “He can lose his way without the people around him to keep him on the path. He could use your insight, I think. And your understanding might help him avoid a bad road, be it through guilt or determination.”

Arabelle got to her feet.

“I’m assuming the hell at the end of this road you mentioned is not a good destination.”

“It does have all the good music,” Jason said.

Left alone to rest, Jason finally turned to the system windows he had been pushing aside each time he regained consciousness.

“That’s quite a lot of system windows,” he murmured to himself and started pulling them up in order.

- You have drawn power from a [Reality Core] to make your soul produce higher-rank mana.
- Your body and soul form a non-binary gestalt.
- Your gestalt being is producing abnormal mana.
- Backlash from using abnormal mana will be distributed across your gestalt being, dispersing the level of harm.

“I remember that one.”

- You are attempting to use [Incomplete Portal Gate]. Attempt has failed.
- You are forcibly applying abnormal mana to [Incomplete Portal Gate]. This will result in harm to your gestalt being.

“And that one.”

- You have opened a portal using an unstable medium. You are forcibly maintaining stability using large amounts of high-grade mana. Backlash from high-grade mana and harm from using an incomplete function of the cloud flask are both increased.

“This is where it starts getting blurry.”

“Mr Asano, you are talking to yourself again,” Shade said.

“I’m talking to you. It’s a normal thing.”

“You sensed my presence?”

“Honestly, no. All I can feel is kind of a pointy tingle. If I try to move or use mana it becomes a very pointy tingle.”

“Neither ‘pointy’ nor ‘tingle’ are words one should use if they wish to be a person of decorum, Mr Asano, especially in conjunction with one another.”

“Because ‘pointy tingle’ sounds like there’s something wrong with your—”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

Jason grinned as he pulled up the next system window.

- You have opened a gate to your spirit realm. The abnormal mana being produced by your gestalt being has sealed the gate. End abnormal mana production to release the gate.

“I think I remember this. Did I get chucked across the room?”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

The next system window was an event log of messages about his body breaking down, interspersed with increasingly drastic actions taken to keep him alive. His grin turned into a

rictus as he skimmed his way down, accessing a scroll bar that indicated the list was extremely long.

“Cut off my arms and legs?” he read.

“We wanted to cut off your head, Mr Asano, but you were unlikely to survive it.”

“That’s not a concept that really requires explanation, Shade. It’s fairly safe to assume that if you cut someone’s head off, it’ll kill them.”

“We postulated that you could potentially survive, with Colin’s assistance.”

“Postulate meaning guess. I’m not going to check if I can survive decapitation, even if I’m guessing that I can. Also, I’d need to be in good condition for that scenario. Good for someone who doesn’t have a head anymore, obviously. I was not in good condition.”

“Which is why we did not risk it.”

Things at the bottom of the event log started getting strange. Some of the lines were written in an ideographic language that even his power to read what he thought were all languages couldn’t translate. Just making the attempt gave him a headache and sent the mana in his body cascading, triggering a sharp pain. Once it subsided, he made no further attempt to read it, skimming ahead to where normal language appeared again.

- You have attempted to establish a spirit domain.
- You have already exceeded the maximum total spirit domain area.
- You are of insufficient rank relative to the local ambient magic to establish a spirit domain.
- You have failed to establish a spirit domain.
- All mana used in the attempt to form a spirit domain has been expended.

After that came more of the ideographs that he didn't attempt to decipher, skimming down once more. This time, the lines of incomprehensible language went on for an excessive length. Even just skimming them Jason was getting a headache, but he also got a sense of familiarity from them that for some reason he instinctively associated with Gordon.

- You have attuned your body to resonate with the local dimensional membrane.
- The physical emphasis of your gestalt being causing its physical/spiritual imbalance has been rectified.
- Your ability to sense astral forces has increased.
- You have forcibly unsealed the restricted effect of the title [Reality Hegemon].

“Shade,” Jason said as he scrolled through screen after screen of the impenetrable ideographs. “What did Gordon do?”

“I am uncertain.”

Jason went back to scrolling through the alien script until he finally reached the end.

- Restrictions on [Fundament Gate] and [Firmament Bridge] have been removed.
- [Fundament Gate] has been broken down.
- [Fundament Core] has been added to your inventory.
- [Fundamental Realm Authority Token] has been added to your inventory.
- Your ability to control magic under the influence of [Builder] through the [Fundament Gate] has been lost.

- Your ability to access the fundamental realm of physical realities has been lost.
- [Firmament Bridge] has been broken down.
- [Firmament Core] has been added to your inventory.
- [Firmament Bridge Anchor] has been added to your inventory.
- Your ability to create astral constructs through the [Firmament Bridge] has been lost.
- [Firmament Bridge] was a requirement for the [Incomplete Portal Gate] component of your [Cloud Flask]. [Incomplete Portal Gate] is no longer functional.

“Uh, I think that might be bad.”

“Mr Asano?”

“I think my spirit realm just ate the things I needed to build the bridge linking Pallimustus and Earth. You know, the one that I have to build so that Earth doesn’t become increasingly unstable and ultimately break down and be washed into oblivion.”

“That does sound less than ideal, Mr Asano. Perhaps some of the other system windows will offer a solution.”

Jason pulled up the next window as Shade suggested.

- You have an incomplete spirit realm. [Fundament Core] will automatically be consumed to establish an [Astral Throne].
- Your rank is insufficient to establish [Astral Throne].
- Abnormal mana being produced from your gestalt form is sufficient to establish [Astral Throne].

- [Fundament Core] has been consumed to establish [Astral Throne].
- You have an incomplete spirit realm. [Firmament Core] will automatically be consumed to establish an [Astral Gate].
- Your rank is insufficient to establish [Astral Gate].
- Abnormal mana being produced from your gestalt form is sufficient to establish [Astral Gate].
- [Firmament Core] has been consumed to establish [Astral Gate].

“Okay, I have no idea what any of that means. Shade, have you ever heard of an astral throne?”

“Oh dear.”

“Okay, that’s a yes. What about an astral gate?”

“I suppose it makes sense to have them both. Oh my.”

“Can you tell me about them?”

“That is probably a conversation best saved for when you can access your spirit realm, Mr Asano.”

“Can they help me solve my dissolving planet problem?”

“Perhaps the astral gate is a possibility, but this is not my field and it would be irresponsible of me to make any guesses as to the likelihood of that being the case. I believe that Hierophant Dawn is the correct person to pose those questions to.”

There were still more system windows and Jason pulled the next one up, hoping it had something to assure him that he hadn’t doomed the Earth. Unfortunately, they were all just notifications of things he already knew, like when his cloud house reflexively altered its form and when his body—which

it kept calling his gestalt being—stopped producing abnormal mana.

“I think I need to talk with Dawn,” Jason said. “Do you think she’ll be cranky that I ate the magic bridge?”

“She gave you an object of great power and you used it to do something absurd, Mr Asano. If she failed to anticipate that by this stage, the shortcoming is hers.”

“That’s certainly true, but what I asked is if she’ll be cranky.”

“Yes, Mr Asano. I do believe she will.”

REASONS TO QUIETLY DREAD

JASON'S BODY WAS RIGID AND TENSE, TREMBLING WITH PAIN AS he channelled mana, teeth gritted and fists clenched. Forcefully cycling mana through the matrix that was the magical framework on which his body was built accelerated Jason's recovery. This made the massive quantities of mana required to form new bodies for Shade the perfect physical and magical therapy.

Jason let out a groan of relief as a new Shade body manifested and he could finally take a pause. His whole body slumped as he let himself settle deeper into the plush recliner that enfolded him like an armchair made of marshmallows. The cloud-substance it was made from was fluffy white with blue and orange embellishments, much like the rest of the room. Another exercise Jason used was modifying the cloud house, although he'd only done his recovery room thus far.

"One more?" he asked with a strained voice.

"No, that's enough for now," Neil told him. "Pushing yourself to an appropriate level and then getting back to it after a rest will be better for your recovery than going until you pass out. Farrah made me promise not to let you overdo it, and she was right to do so. Most people try to slack off through a process this painful, not keep going."

"Pain's been a companion longer than you have, Neil. I like you more."

"Oh, you find me to be a better companion than excruciating pain. That's very gratifying."

“Oh, definitely,” Jason said. “You’re in the top twenty for sure.”

“I’m in the top twenty companions in a six-person team?”

“Thirteen-person team, when you count familiars, then there’s Rufus and his team, Alejandro Albericci—”

“Who?”

“The guy who put my new wardrobe together.”

“The tailor counts as a companion?”

“I wear his work everywhere. Then there’s Clive’s wife.”

“Clive’s wife is imaginary!”

“Yeah,” Jason said, shaking his head sadly. “Poor bloke. But that’s why she’s barely above you.”

“If you’re talking this much nonsense,” Neil said, “you’re clearly getting back to your old self. Gods help us. I’m going to leave you to rest.”

As Neil reached the door, Jason called his name. As it lacked the usual joking tone, it arrested Neil’s attention.

“Thank you,” Jason said softly.

“It’s my role,” Neil told him.

“Yeah, well, you do it well.”

Jason hobbled in a slow circle around the room, grateful for the soft floor under his aching feet.

“Shade, how is it that I can handle flooding my body with pain, but can barely put up with sore feet?”

“As I find myself at a loss to answer within the bounds of polite conversation, Mr Asano, I shall decline to answer.”

“Shade, did you just call me a wuss?”

“I quite explicitly didn’t call you anything, Mr Asano.”

“Yes, but we both know the inferences you conjure up are more deadly than the swords Humphrey does.”

“Thank you, Mr Asano.”

Jason returned to the recliner at the centre of the room, wanting to collapse but lowering himself slowly.

“Shade, now that I’m recovering, albeit slowly, my senses are starting to return. I couldn’t even tell what was going on with myself, at first. Now I’m starting to come to grips with the changes I’ve gone through, and I think I know why I’ve been feeling some uncharacteristic awkwardness from you.”

“My apologies, Mr Asano. You should not be getting additional problems from me when you are already have enough to—”

“You don’t owe me apologies or explanations, Shade. I’ve had to deal with a lot over the last few years, and none of that would have been possible without you. Did your dad send you to me just so I could free the souls trapped inside the flesh abominations, or was it because of the larger concerns involving the World-Phoenix and the Builder?”

“I honestly do not know.”

“Did you get the option of saying no?”

“I did. My... what you might call siblings, are not curious by nature. Their interests begin and end in serving the Reaper. They only accept a position as a familiar if it serves the Reaper’s interests. I am an outlier in having been a familiar so many times through my desire to explore the cosmos.”

“Which is why being bound to that astral space for all that time must have been bloody awful for you. Nowhere to go and with no more companions than the vorger and the tormented souls trapped inside flesh monsters.”

“That was only a short time, in the scope of my existence, Mr Asano.”

“Yeah, but time doesn’t go faster just because you have a lot of it. But I guess that’s why you didn’t make the same choice as Colin and Gordon. I’m the latest in a long line of

people you've had as a summoner, and there'll be many more after. You're kind of like Doctor Who and I'm one of your companions."

Shade didn't respond, Jason feeling the awkwardness in his familiar's aura growing.

"It's alright, Shade. I mostly brought it up because I want to understand what is happening. I can feel that my bond with Colin and Gordon is stronger and I can feel that they both chose that. I'm not sure how or why it happened, though."

"It is because of the changes in your spirit realm, Mr Asano. The astral throne and the astral gate in your spirit realm will give you much greater control over the spirit domains you have formed. As you are aware, you created the ones you already have by accident."

"This is starting get confusing," Jason said.

"It will only become more complicated, Mr Asano. Your spirit realm is the reality that exists inside you and your power is, for any practical intent, absolute. Your spirit domains are the territories you have claimed spiritually, imprinting your authority on. The one in Slovakia and the one in France."

"I never intended to. I just wanted the transformation zones to not blast a hole in the side of the universe and wipe out the planet."

"Nonetheless, Mr Asano, those territories were claimed. But they are crude, like a bowl made with bare hands from river clay. An astral throne and an astral gate are the sculpting tools, the potter's wheel and the kiln you need to transform the crude clay into an immaculate bowl."

"And that somehow allows my familiars to grow a deeper bond with me?"

"The changes to your spirit domain have given you the ability to create avatars within your spirit domains. You were doing this unconsciously, during the time you were... unconscious. We, as your familiars, felt a draw to bond ourselves to you."

"More permanently than the familiar bond," Jason said.

“Yes. As summoned familiars, we can allow our bond with your soul to expire each time you summon a new vessel for us to inhabit. A similar entity would take our place. If we accept the deeper bond, that connection becomes eternal. We bind our fates to you forever.”

“I appreciate that you three have all stuck with me through some fairly wonky events. Is quitting as a familiar common? I can’t help thinking about Noreth.”

Noreth, who Jason had most known as Mr North, had come to Jason’s world as the familiar to a returning outworlder, the Network founder. After centuries together and an ideological falling out, the bond had been severed and Noreth ended up selling out his former bond companion. The Network founder had been captured by the United States branches of the very organisation he had founded, leading to the USA becoming dominant within the wider Network.

“Noreth was a bonded familiar, not a summoned one,” Shade explained. “The link is more intimate and harder to break. Summoned familiars rarely end their tenure with such acrimony, even when there is a falling out. The connection is not as integral as with a bonded familiar, and the summoned familiar is rarely in true danger through inhabiting a vessel. The vessel being destroyed costs them little beyond time and annoyance. Most familiars stay with the summoner throughout the summoner’s life unless there is a major divergence of principle. To serve as a familiar gives us power, especially as the familiar of a high-ranker.”

“What kind of power are you getting, exactly?”

“That’s not really for you to know, at your current rank.”

“I hate to break it to you Shade, but not for my current rank is kind of my thing.”

“That is true, Mr Asano. I will simply say that it is a form of authority, although not authority as you understand it.”

“That word authority keeps cropping up.”

“Yes, Mr Asano. I fear that, once again, you will find yourself involved with power no mortal should have to deal

with. Especially such a weak one. To a large degree, you are incapable of comprehending the forces involved. Your perception cannot grasp its nature. Even with your insight into astral forces, authority, as it is understood on a cosmic level, is too alien. The principles that govern what it is and how it functions are too incomprehensible to a being of physical reality. Even with your unusual nature, you simply just aren't equipped to conceive of the concepts involved, let alone comprehend them. Trying to explain them would be like trying to get a pebble to appreciate poetry or you to be quietly anonymous."

"Oh, that's hilarious."

"Mr Asano, we are in a clifftop temple you built to yourself while unconscious and projecting a kilometre high image of your inner soul."

"That was an accident."

"Yes, Mr Asano, but you do seem rather accident-prone."

"How about we go back to talking about familiar bonds."

"Very wise, Mr Asano. As I explained, an astral throne allows you to form avatars, but they are restricted to your spirit domains. But others bonded to you can deepen that bond to also serve as avatars, allowing them to be your agents outside of your spirit domains. But that bond is forever. Colin and Gordon accepted that bond the moment it became available."

Jason nodded.

"I can sense them. I'm a little concerned that Colin and Gordon jumped in so quickly. I didn't have the chance to discuss it with them."

"They are young. Headstrong, like you. Loyal at any cost. Also like you."

"I can feel them much more than before. Is this what it's like having a bonded familiar?"

"I do not know, Mr Asano. I've never had a familiar. And as for why I did not accept the bond—"

“No,” Jason said firmly, cutting him off. “I know you might feel awkward when the others accepted the bond and you didn’t, but you never have to explain yourself to me. With everything you’ve done, you’ve earned more gratitude than I’ll ever be able to pay back. Even if you choose to not return, the next time I summon a vessel, that’s okay. You’ll still be my friend and that’s the only expectation I have of you.”

Shade stood in silence for a long time before finally speaking.

“You do not have to pay me back for any gratitude you feel, Mr Asano. Friends do not count favours.”

Jason grinned.

“Alright, then. So, where do you think this bond comes from?”

“I am certain it is related to what your astral realm has become now, after the latest changes. I suspect the astral throne at the heart of your soul is the responsible factor.”

“What was it like? The bond offer?”

“It is hard to describe. It felt like the first step on a path that is yet obscured while your power is so low. It wasn’t just a bond to render the familiar link permanent, but also to become...”

Shade paused, searching for the right word.

“...not your avatar, like those puppets that have been popping up in the cloud house. Something more. A representative for your interests. The voice of your will.”

“That sounds a little ominous.”

“Mr Asano, you obtained an astral throne and an astral gate in the middle of attempting to not explode. Not only is that utterly absurd, even by your standards, but you will come to understand how ominous your gaining them truly is.”

Jason had several reasons to quietly dread Dawn arriving for a talk. One was that he strongly suspected that it would be the last time he saw her in a long time, if not forever. He'd had his fill of extended separations from his friends and had no interest in going through it again, but of course, Dawn could not stay. Aside from having her own responsibilities, the power disparity was far too great for her to be slumming it with Jason and his companions. She was no longer a silver-rank avatar that could fight side by side with Farrah.

Another reason was that he was worried about the reaction, not of Dawn, but of her boss, to the destruction of the artefacts Jason had absorbed into his soul. They were broken down entirely, their power fully absorbed and their original purposes rendered non-functional. There was no telling what that meant for the World-Phoenix's agenda and what it would do to Jason as a result.

Related to this was the fear that Jason had doomed the Earth to destruction. He didn't believe the great astral beings would allow that to happen just because of an inconsequential entity like Jason, but they could also just cut their losses and move on. What was a single planet to them beyond one of a trillion, trillion pawns in a game so vast that Jason couldn't even see the square he was positioned on?

Jason was unsure about what was to come, but he suspected it would hinge on the two items in his inventory that had been looted from the destruction of the artefacts. He'd looked at them many times since he'd gotten strong enough to open his inventory and read the descriptions, although he was still too weak to move objects in or out. He opened his inventory yet again to reread the description of the first item.

Item: [Fundamental Realm Authority Token] (transcendent rank, unavailable)

Symbol of authorisation to modify physical reality (decree, token).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and can only be used by [Jason Asano] and [Zithis Carrow Vayel].
- Effect: Gives the wielder the authority to open gates to the fundamental realm of any physical reality.

Many things about the description left Jason wondering. From the description, it gave him the authority to access the underlying foundations of reality—the strange realm where reality cores could be picked up like cabbages and the fundamental aspects of the universe could be modified. It was a place he had accessed many times on Earth, undoing the damage the Network founder had done centuries before.

Similar work needed to be done in Pallimustus as well, albeit on a smaller scale. It was necessary to build the bridge that would save the Earth, but the authority to enter that realm wasn't enough. It didn't matter if he was allowed to open the gates if he lacked the power to do so. That ability had been lost by destroying the magic door artefact in his soul, the same one from which the token he now looked at had been looted.

There was also the rank of the item. Even the transcendent rank items he had seen in the past were listed as legendary, but this one listed the rarity as unavailable. That suggested he *really* wasn't meant to have it, which made him wonder who would be coming to take it away.

The last thing was the name: Zithis Carrow Vayel. The item was bound to Jason because he had looted it, and because the thing he looted it from was a part of his soul, or a bit of both. That left the question of who this Zithis person was and why they could use it as well. Jason was hoping it was the name of the Network founder who had gone to Earth centuries before, using the magic door Jason had ultimately absorbed to

set in motion the events Jason was attempting to bring an end to.

It didn't strike Jason as a very Earth-like name, even for ye olden days. That was a strike against it, as the founder had been a returned outworlder, like himself. Jason hoped he was wrong, though, because he could only think of one other alternative. If it was the original name of the Builder, from when he was a mortal, Jason didn't imagine knowing it would bode well for him in general. For all he knew, the great astral beings would collectively annihilate him for peeking behind the curtain at one of their number.

Jason looked at the other item, which was largely obscured.

Item: [Firmamental Bridge Anchor] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (consumable, ??).

- Effect: ???.

- Uses remaining: 1/1

The familiar obfuscation was comforting. In the past, he'd been annoyed about transcendent items having their descriptions hidden from him, but having one revealed only made him feel worse. Seeing the question marks in the descriptions suddenly felt like putting on a comfy woollen jumper he found after thinking he'd lost it.

Looking at the question marks, suddenly, his head spiked with pain, like when he'd tried reading the strange, alien script that had been in his event log. Suddenly, Jason had a very bad feeling. He always knew that his translation power was why his system boxes appeared in English, but he suddenly started wondering if the reason he couldn't read the descriptions was really that his power rank was too low. He'd always assumed his rank being low and the items being high was the cause, but now he had a sneaking new suspicion.

Perhaps the reason it didn't translate was that the descriptions were in the strange, alien text. Was it the language of the great astral beings? Could he read the Builder-derived items because the Builder wasn't a native great astral being but an ascended mortal?

"Bloody hell," Jason muttered as he closed his inventory. He hated that these were the kinds of questions he was asking himself, and was back to dreading Dawn giving him the answers.

AUTHORITY

DAWN'S DIMENSIONAL VEHICLE, A GARDEN COTTAGE INSIDE AN orb, approached Jason's cloud building. Standing at the edge of the garden, Dawn looked at what was now an architectural chimera of fluffy white cloud house and stark, black temple. Despite being unable to extend her senses into the building and check on Jason, she had stayed away since warning his friends. She had gone further than she intended with them, fearing she had left enough pieces for them to turn suspicion into certainty. That could spell disaster for Jason when the time came.

As for the reason Dawn had become involved in affairs in the first place, things were going well. Jason had done something insane and almost gotten himself killed, but that was inevitable. It was the reason she had bargained for a single chance to intervene, even if she then spent it protecting the Storm Kingdom instead.

From a strategic perspective, she would have been better off losing the battle to win the war, as the survival of Rimaros was not required for the World-Phoenix's agenda to reach fruition. While she might be a servant of the World-Phoenix, however, she was still her own person, which was an independence the World-Phoenix valued in its servants. The World-Phoenix had selected Dawn to watch over Jason for this very reason: to help her to reconnect with her fading mortality.

Dawn was forced to admit that whatever forces he was involved with and powers he accrued, Jason was unrepentantly mortal. Immortality had led her to push aside the individual

moments and the small pleasures. This strange man had grounded her, reminding her of how to live in the moment instead of looking only to the infinite distance. She had made impractical choices she never would have before, yet could not find it in herself to regret them.

Flying down from her dimensional vessel in the sky, Dawn alighted in front of the strange cloud building, on the grass between the building and the river. It had been largely churned to mud by the many feet that had surrounded the cloud house when events were at their most dramatic, but, like Jason, the grass was slowly recovering. She walked towards the open arch leading inside, satisfied that her task for the World-Phoenix was almost done. Jason would ride out the rest of the monster surge in recovery, unable to give her any more outrageous surprises.

“What do you mean, you extra-absorbed them?” Dawn asked.

She was sitting in a simple, firm cloud construct chair while Jason was sprawled in a large, soft one that looked like a throne made of pudding.

“Well,” he said, looking sheepish. “You know how I absorbed the Builder’s magic door when I was only meant to use it, and then you used that as a basis for the magic bridge I was supposed to absorb?”

“Yes,” Dawn said, her voice heavy with suspicion.

“They were clanking around in my soul, doing their respective tasks, which is fine, I guess. But then, you know, stuff happened. And in the course of stuff happening, the two magic things kinds of got... broken down for parts.”

“Broken down for parts?”

“And looted.”

“Looted?”

“When you just keep repeating what I say in an increasingly angry tone, it makes me think that you’re angry.”

“Jason, what did you do?”

“That same thing I always do! I almost got killed, weird stuff happened and now I have to deal with it to save the world.”

“You’re saying that the bridge you need to build and the door you need to build it are gone.”

“Uh, yep.”

Dawn closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

“I didn’t think diamond-rankers could get headaches,” she muttered.

“I imagine it’s psychosomatic, given the control essence users have over their autonomic...”

Jason trailed off as Dawn’s eyes opened to glare at him.

“Rhetorical question, fair enough,” he said.

Hunched over, looking down at the floor, she spoke quietly, her voice weary.

“Tell me exactly what happened,” she instructed. “Those objects both possessed vast amounts of power, along with other things that someone of your rank has no place knowing even exist.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured that out. Good news: I managed to loot an item from each that can probably help with building a magic bridge. I reckon the bunch of the stuff I’m not meant to know about went into those items instead of back into my soul. I figure they weren’t really meant to be there in the first place, so my soul spat them back out.”

“What items?”

“One is called a firmament bridge anchor. It sounds like exactly what we need. After all, the bridge is partly built already. What we need to do is anchor it on this side, right?”

Some of the tension left Dawn’s shoulders.

“That’s not what I would call good,” she said, “but it’s not an unmitigated disaster. It complicates things, but it at least gives you a path forward. More importantly, it doesn’t give you something you shouldn’t have.”

Jason’s thoughts immediately drifted to the astral throne and astral gate residing in his spirit realm, still unexamined.

“What do you mean?” he asked lightly.

“I’m going to tell you something that is far above your position in the power hierarchy of reality, Jason, although it is something you have been hovering around the edge of for some time. You know that the great astral beings make deals with one another. They have done so over you.”

“Yep.”

“The key to this is authority. To the great astral beings, authority is a much more expansive concept than it is to you or even to me. It does have the usual definition as a right to exercise power, but to them, it is also power itself, and far more than that. To a great astral being, authority is not just the right to act but the strength to. It is a currency to be paid and bargained with, a resource to be consumed. It is who they are, what they are and what they do. A god embodies a singular conception and remains essentially unchanging so long as the concept doesn’t change. A god of the rivers will be altered if all the rivers dry up, but does not change as the waters pass into the sea. Compared to this, great astral beings are more transactional in their power, their areas of influence and even their very essence. They deal in pacts and bargains, with authority as coin of the realm.”

“I’m not entirely sure I follow.”

“Nor should you. If you claimed you did, you would either be a liar or simply wrong.”

“You’re saying the Dao that can be spoken is not the true Dao?”

“Something like that. I wouldn’t have expected religion from you.”

“Oh, I’m full of surprises, me.”

“Yes,” Dawn accused. “You are.”

She shook her head.

“The important thing you need to understand,” she continued, not letting him sidetrack her further, “is that the authority of great astral beings is not just what they have or what they use but what they are. Authority is their flesh and blood. Their DNA. Their souls.”

“They can trade their souls in chunks?”

“Yes.”

“Is that why the Builder keeps getting away with crap he really shouldn’t? He started off mortal instead of being made of this super authority, so the idea of pushing the boundaries of a deal or ignoring the authority of another isn’t so alien?”

“I cannot say for certain, but that may be part of it. You, of all people, understand that profound changes in nature can lead to unexpected capability. But that is not what is important.”

“You realise that the very concept of transactional authority essentially means corruption, right?”

“Be careful where you tread, Asano.”

“The artefacts,” Jason said, his voice rising half an octave in his rush to change the subject. “They had some of that authority in them, didn’t they?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “And that was acceptable, even in your soul, so long as those artefacts were operating as intended. The door was never meant to be absorbed, but part of the deal to provide the bridge resolved that. Using the bridge would have eliminated the authority within the door and within itself once your task was complete.”

“And now the authority is in these items I’ve looted and the programming your boss and Builder put on them is gone? I basically reformatted the computers they built, stripped them down for parts and bunked off with all the RAM sticks? Now I’m running around loose with all the power of that authority, like a monkey with an assault rifle.”

“That monstrous chimera of an analogy is not entirely inaccurate. Somehow.”

“So, why aren’t there diamond-rank leg-breakers coming to take the super authority back?”

“Because the great astral beings don’t know what you’ve done yet. You have yet to leave your spirit domain.”

“They really can’t see in here, then. Good to know.”

“Show me the items,” Dawn told him. “If the authority they hold truly has been condensed from the artefacts, it’s likely it took the form of items because ungoverned authority held by you might kill you.”

“Might?”

“It may surprise you, Mr Asano, to learn that this is my first time seeing a silver-ranker running around with unattended chunks of authority from not just one but two great astral beings. I’m not entirely sure what will happen.”

“They aren’t going to tolerate me having any of their secret sauce, though, are they?”

“No, Jason. They will not. It will be unacceptable to any of them, not just the World-Phoenix and the Builder. I suspect you may be safe from the World-Phoenix, however, if the item you looted from the bridge is what I think. We should start with you showing me these items.”

Jason invited Dawn to a party so he could display his inventory through the party interface power.

“Can you read the description?” Jason asked her of the Firmamental Bridge Anchor.

“No, but I know this item. As I hoped, it’s something you can use to establish the bridge, and doing so will consume the authority in the item. The great astral beings will have no qualms with you possessing it because it remains single-use by nature. Once the task you have is fulfilled, the authority will be spent and gone. There will be problems with using it, compared to the bridge you destroyed to get it, but we can look at those later.”

Jason pulled up the description of the other item, the fundamental realm authority token.

“This is a problem,” Dawn said immediately. “You can’t have this.”

“I kind of had a feeling.”

“You will need to give it back. You do have some leverage, however.”

“Oh?”

“The fact that you have this is a major demonstration of the Builder’s failure. Your inconsequential stature means that all the blame for any of his authority falling into your hands is entirely placed on him.”

“But they’ll still shred me into my component particles for having it, though, won’t they?”

“Yes, which is why you need to give it back. But because the Builder is in an awkward position, you can ask for some concessions from him.”

Jason nodded.

“I’ll give it some thought,” he said. “The great astral beings will know I have this as soon as I take it outside, right?”

“Or when I go outside. The World-Phoenix will know because I know.”

“Fair enough, but let’s put a pin in that and swing back to the complications with establishing the bridge. While I’m glad I didn’t ruin the whole plan, surely I put a dent in it. Starting with the fact that even if I didn’t give away this authority thing of the Builder’s, I don’t have a way back into the fundamental realm-space. I guess that’s the first concession I ask for.”

“Yes. That is a problem with an easy solution, as you only need access once to establish the anchor. The larger problem is the bridge itself.”

“I have the magic thing. You just said I could keep it.”

“That can anchor the bridge, but you still need to complete its construction. The bridge items I gave you would allow to you do that task, but now you will need to find a way to construct it yourself.”

“Can’t you show me how to do that?”

“Jason, my grasp of astral magic is formidable, but you have taken an already intricate situation and made it considerably worse. It may surprise you to learn that my expertise does not extend to building a bridge between a pair of worlds illicitly modified from the creation of their respective universes and connected through a link that was then tampered with and left to grow unstable over the course of centuries until those modifications were mostly undone by someone who barely understands what he’s doing and then used the link as a basis to build half of an astral bridge he also doesn’t understand with a magical artefact he accidentally digested and now can’t use to finish the job.”

“So, ‘no’ is what you’re saying.”

“That is correct, Jason,” she said, biting off each word like they were the heads of small animals. “I’m saying no.”

“Good thing you don’t breathe or that would have been rough. Still, you have a plan, right? I mean, I could make a plan, but you’ve probably heard about my plans. It’s usually a two-steps-forward-one-step-back scenario. And the last step is onto a landmine.”

“As always seems to be the case with you, Jason, you are both the problem and the solution.”

“Which is what’s going on with my plans, which I personally think—”

“The messengers,” Dawn said, cutting him off.

“The messengers?”

“The messengers are the best practitioners of dimensional magic that I am aware of. I suspect that much of the magic that the Builder cult has been using comes from them, as part of whatever bargain brought them to this world.”

“And they have the magic I need?”

“Their strongest magic—the magic that allows them to stage invasions across dimensions—is predicated on the trait that makes them unique as a species,” Dawn explained. “Dimensional travel is exceedingly difficult. The reason the messengers can do it so well is that their gestalt bodies can endure dimensional forces that even others with astral affinities, like celestines, cannot. This means that they can afford to travel via dimensional magic that other species would not survive.”

“You’re saying that their knowledge of dimensional magic is high, but their dimensional magic is crude.”

“Crude?” Dawn asked. “We’re talking about interdimensional travel magic that silver-rankers can use to transport thousands of people between realities. You have no idea of the refinement required to perform that kind of task with any less power than the magical equivalent of a sun.”

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “They know their stuff. You think their theories will help me repair this bridge?”

“You should hope so,” Dawn said. “Otherwise, the World-Phoenix will be forced to take more forceful measures.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that after what you accomplished on Earth, she can send people to fix this. If she does, however, it will not be with finesse. Imagine preventing a teacup from falling off a shelf by drilling a hole in it and bolting it to the wall.”

“I take it that Earth is the teacup?”

“Yes.”

“Your boss doesn’t have anyone with finesse?”

“She doesn’t have anyone steeped in this from the beginning. Like it or not, Jason, your fingerprints are all over the half-completed astral bridge. It’s such a mess now that anyone else will have to bulldoze what’s there and build over the top.”

“Then how do I get these messengers to teach me their magic?”

“I have no idea. As far as I am aware, they won’t. Fortunately, this world is currently host to a great number of them whom you can ask.”

“Which is awfully convenient. If they weren’t around, you’d send me off on some other errand that would probably kill me, right?”

“Yes. But as they are here, you can ask them for access to their magic.”

“By which you mean ‘beat them up and take whatever magic theory they have so Clive and I can reverse engineer it.’”

“See?” Dawn asked. “You’re on the right path already.”

“Oh, that’s terrific. Fighting some interdimensional threat in order to save the Earth because a bunch of transcendent beings have been messing with it. And of course, they refuse to help fix it because of their own nonsense rules or just being pricks in general. I can’t possibly imagine what that’ll be like.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Jason. You lack Neil’s bitter flair.”

Jason pushed himself out of the chair, reached for an object in his inventory and pulled it out. He snarled through the pain as he circulated his mana to do so until it appeared in his hand. A brown stone tablet, it had an image of a world engraved into it and no other features.

“Ow. I knew pulling stuff out of my inventory would sting to buggery.”

Jason started hobbling towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Dawn asked as she followed.

“To give this back,” he said. “You said I have to. Should give the people still watching this place a good show.”

“We should discuss what you’re going to ask for.”

“I know what I’m going to ask for.”

“I can help you—”

“No, you can’t, Dawn. We both know that.”

He flashed her a bright smile.

“You’ve helped me too many times already. I know you’ve been pushing the boundaries of whatever deals you’ve been making.”

“So has the Builder.”

“But will your boss let you get away with what he does?”

“No,” she admitted.

“I have to deal with the Builder, Dawn. I have to handle the messengers and I have to save the world. Again. And that’s okay. Interdimensional heroics are kind of my thing.”

She let out an exasperated groan as she followed Jason’s slow progress down the main stairs of the temple.

“You’ll have to leave your spirit domain for the great astral beings to sense that manifested authority you’re holding. Be careful what you say outside of your domain because there will be many eavesdroppers.”

They reached the open arch that marked the edge of the cloud temple and Jason’s spirit domain. He paused at the threshold.

“Okay,” he said. “So, I step out and wait for some Builder lackey to turn up and repo this thing?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“And we can’t discuss anything delicate outside of the spirit domain?”

“That’s right.”

“Good to know. By the way, I have an astral throne and an astral gate now.”

Jason stepped out of his spirit domain.

“WHAT?”

THE KIND OF PAIN I'M USED TO

JASON ASANO'S CLOUD HOUSE WAS CURRENTLY PART HOUSE and part dark temple; it was not a clean division but a disorienting mismatch of pieces. It was as if someone had taken the shattered remnants of two very different buildings and assembled a new one from what they could salvage. This was the result of Jason slowly transforming the building from the state it had been left in after the events that transformed it and Jason both.

He had almost killed himself again in a move that was characteristically extravagant, self-destructive and desperate. To rescue his team and a group of civilians trapped in a mine below the sea floor, he had used the cloud house and his own body to channel forces that the house could handle but he could not. Only the frenzied intervention of friends and a number of peculiarities about Jason himself allowed him to survive at all, and the repercussions were heavy. The process had been more than a little overt, and now there were observers stationed near the cloud house, discreetly watching.

The damage to Jason ran soul deep, well beyond the ability of healing magic to repair. Recovery was a combination of time and exercising the mana in his magical body. Just circulating his mana to move around exacted a pain that was more than physical, being akin to a soul attack. If he hadn't long ago endured far worse, he would have had trouble functioning at all.

Jason pushed himself more and more with each passing day, since using magic accelerated his recovery. The more he

could take the pain, the faster he would get back to full strength. One thing Jason could do was take pain. Whether physical or spiritual, it was something with which he had become intimately familiar since magic's arrival into his life.

Always preferring to do a single task for multiple ends, one of Jason's most frequent magical exercises was reshaping his cloud house, turning it from an ominous black temple into a friendly, fluffy house made of clouds. It was still a work in progress, leading to the house's current unusual state.

Jason had been alternately dreading and anticipating a visit from his diamond-rank friend, Dawn. When she finally turned up, they discussed the ramifications of what he'd done to himself and what his future held, once he'd recovered. In particular, they discussed one of the side effects of the magical event: Jason coming into possession of a certain object.

Great astral beings were the most powerful entities in the cosmos, and the nature of both themselves and their power was known as authority. After breaking down an item created by such a being, Jason now had a piece of that power, physically manifested. It was only the barest sliver, but it came from an entity whose core purpose was to make new universes, so even that meagre amount was transcendently potent.

It was not the kind of object that should be in the hands of Dawn, who was at the peak of mortal power, let alone Jason. She had made it clear that he needed to get rid of it before someone came to do it for him and, to her surprise, he agreed. Caught off guard by Jason making the sensible choice, she hadn't stopped him before he marched outside of the sanctuary of his cloud house.

Jason's cloud house was one of his spirit domains. He didn't have a full grasp of what a spirit domain was, exactly, since Dawn and Shade both refused to tell him, purportedly for his own good. Even so, simply possessing a spirit domain gave him a certain level of inherent understanding. He knew spirit domains were somehow related to power beyond that which mortals normally possessed. It was similar to the inner sanctuaries of temples to the gods, and inside his spirit

domain, even gods could not spy on him. It was as if his spirit domain was territory from which they were excluded.

Once he was outside of his spirit domain cloud house, gods and great astral beings would immediately know about the sliver of authority in his possession. Knowing that they would not tolerate him keeping it, he settled in to wait for them to send someone along.

Dawn warned Jason not to speak of anything too delicate outside of his spirit domain. It would shield them from eavesdroppers both divine and otherwise, with many observers still watching the cloud house. Following that warning, Jason quickly mentioned something to Dawn that he didn't want to get yelled at about before stepping out of the spirit domain and onto the lawn in front of his cloud house.

Dawn was still standing in the archway entrance. "You realise I can just yell at you from here, right?"

Jason concentrated, grunting with pain as he used his magic. The spirit domain shrank into the building just enough to leave Dawn standing outside of it.

"You think you're funny, don't you?" she asked.

He grinned, although the lingering pain showed in his eyes.

"Yeah. And so do you."

She shook her head, not denying it as she stepped out to join him on the lawn. They made an odd pair, standing side by side. She had an elegant white dress and hair like delicate strings of rubies, sparkling in the sun. He was emaciated and hunched over like a retiree. He was also dressed like one, in a floral shirt and tan shorts, as if he'd wandered off from his warm-climate retirement community.

The cloud house was on a cliff top, close to a river that spilled over the edge to the lagoon below. There was an invisible magical barrier running along the cliff, keeping children—or their parents who had a few too many to drink—from going over the side.

It was a beautiful spot to spend a warm, tropical day. Wisps of cloud spilled from the flask-amulet around Jason's neck and took the shape of a floating couch, complete with a shade to keep the sun off. It was a minor use of magic, paining him barely enough to elicit a wince.

"I thought I was used to pain," he said, settling on the couch. "I've been impaled, burned with acid spit and had limbs chopped off. Completely off, and I've gotten used to it. This pain is something else, though."

"That's because your soul and your body are no longer separate things," Dawn said, sitting down next to him. "It's just one thing now, and you went and ruined it. That shouldn't even be possible, but if only one lunatic will find a way, you're the lunatic for the job."

"I'm a trendsetter."

"You're suicidal."

"I am not suicidal. I don't try to get myself killed. It just kind of happens."

"You couldn't have avoided any of those deaths, then?" Dawn asked lightly.

"Oh, that's not fair. I definitely couldn't have avoided the first one. My crappy apartment got sucked through a dimensional rift. And the second and third deaths were heroic sacrifices, thank you very much. Do you know what happens when you don't turn up for the heroic sacrifice? The bad guys are all 'where'd he go?' 'I think he bunked off.' 'Great, lets blow up that city full of people.' And then a city gets blown up or some gold-rank monster arrives in it before the civilians have time to evacuate."

"What about when Shako killed you?"

"The Builder's henchman-in-chief? That guy sucks. He's diamond rank. Killing me was just petty."

"You did mouth off at him."

Jason slapped his forehead in exaggerated realisation.

“Of course! I was rude to him. That totally justified murdering me.”

“What did you expect him to do?”

“His job. The Builder didn’t send him there to kill me.”

Dawn suddenly stood up, moving out from under the shade to look up. Jason made the shade vanish with a wave of his hand to follow her gaze. He spotted a man with pale skin, a shock of red hair and brown robes, descending from the sky.

“He didn’t send me to kill you this time either, Asano,” Shako said. “But let’s see where the day takes us.”

“Oh, you have got to be kidding,” Jason complained. “I thought you took care of the ginger Jedi.”

“So did I,” Dawn said.

“Didn’t you say some scary lady took him away?”

“Carmen of the Sundered Throne,” Dawn said.

“Which is who of what exactly?”

“That is the concern of those who walk the upper echelons of the cosmos, Asano,” Shako said as he landed lightly on the ground in front of them. “It is not something you need to know.”

“That excuse went out the window the moment the bosses of you two started playing ‘blow up the planet,’ with me as the meeple.”

“Pawns do not get to question kings, Asano.”

Jason pushed himself out of the chair with a groan, like an old man.

“I’m so tired of this,” he said to Shako. “Once upon a time, I’d have said something pithy about pawns reaching the other side of the board and getting promoted. You’d look down on me, and then, somewhere down the line, you and I would get into some conflict. Again. And I’d get my arse kicked. Again. But I’d get what I want and you wouldn’t. Again. But I’m past tired of that game and I don’t even care how you crawled out of whatever hole they threw you in.”

“I do,” Dawn said. “You shouldn’t be here, Shako. No one should be seeing you for a very long time, even by our standards.”

“I’m on a furlough,” Shako explained. “The Builder made a proposal and the Sundered Throne accepted. Preparations for the Prime Vessel that will succeed me have not been completed, so I was required in order to channel the Builder without killing the vessel. Which is something you apparently care about, Asano.”

“What proposal does the Builder have?” Dawn asked.

“You know how things are with great astral beings,” Shako said. “Everything is striking bargains and making pacts.”

“It’s because of the authority,” Dawn realised, talking to herself rather than Shako. “The Sundered Throne doesn’t want it in the hands of a mortal.”

“Yes,” Shako said. “Hand it over, Asano. Or are you refusing?”

Dawn’s head jerked to warn Jason, but he held up a hand to forestall her.

“I know better than to answer that,” Jason assured her. He then hobbled right into Shako’s personal space, craning his neck to look at the taller man.

“You don’t have any authority, do you, Shako? Maybe you lug around a little for your boss, or used to, at least. But you’ve never had any of your own, have you?”

“Of course not. It is not my place.”

“Well, I do have some,” Jason said, plucking a brown marble tablet out of his inventory, grunting as the magic circulating in his body to do so pained him.

Shako moved faster than Jason could think, his hand shooting out for the tablet. Dawn moved to intervene, but Shako was closer. The moment Shako’s hand touched the tablet, he was thrown away so fast, it created a sonic boom. Jason was also tossed back, not by the same power as Shako

but simply the backwash of the diamond-ranker's forced departure. He was hammered into the wall of his cloud house.

Shako was blasted through the clifftop's invisible safety barrier as if it wasn't there, the air shimmering along the cliff in a wave as the magic collapsed. It was designed to stop children and drunk people from falling off, not a diamond-ranker thrown by an even greater power.

Wind kicked like a squall from the raw speed of Shako being thrown away, making waves of the surface of the river and rattling windows of the nearby houses. Dawn rushed to check on Jason who had been pushed into the soft white wall of his cloud house like a strawberry into a cream cake.

"I'm fine," he told her as he pushed himself out of the cloud wall. He turned to look at the Jason-shaped hole it as it slowly filled back in. "I feel like a cartoon character."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice strained and gravelly. "This *is* the kind of pain I'm used to."

"What was that?" Dawn asked, turning to look where Shako had shot off.

"Authority," Jason said, looking over at the tablet in the grass where he dropped it. "Have you ever tried to steal authority?"

"Of course not," Dawn said.

"Well, now you know what happens if you do."

"Did you know what would happen when you took it out?"

"I could feel it," Jason said. "From the moment I accepted that it belonged to me. Shako could no more take it from me than he could burn down the cosmos." Jason held out his hand and the tablet flew into it, like an obedient child coming home.

Shako reappeared, flying through the air to land in front of them.

"You should have known better," Jason told him. "That isn't the kind of power you can just take."

“That power doesn’t belong to you.”

“You getting punted halfway across the ocean says different. Now, they gave you a day pass instead of sending someone I don’t hate for a reason. Get your boss on the line.”

“He can’t,” Dawn said. “Sending Shako here was pointless. There’s a pact in place, meaning the Builder isn’t allowed to use vessels here.”

“He’s used them before, deal or no deal,” Jason said.

“The Builder has only spoken through vessels,” Shako said in defence of his master. “The ones you saw were not used for anything.”

“Speaking *is* a thing,” Jason said. “But your boss pushing boundaries of the deals he makes isn’t the point. The point is that I’m giving him permission.”

“That’s not your permission to give,” Dawn said.

“It is today,” Jason said. “And get your boss here too, while we’re at it. I like you, Dawn, but it’s time I spoke with your manager.”

“You don’t get to dictate to great astral beings,” Shako admonished, his tone that of an exasperated adult talking to a child.

“No?” Jason snarled, holding up the tablet. “Then let’s see how much damage I can do with this before one of you kills me.”

“You don’t have the—”

“Shut up, Shako!” Dawn yelled. “Are you seriously going to test the resolve of a man who sacrificed his only resurrection rather than be polite to you?”

Shako grimaced but remained silent.

“That’s what I thought,” Jason said. “Get your bosses here.”

“Jason,” Dawn said, “I wasn’t just saying it when I said that isn’t your permission to give. There is a pact in place that governs those rules.”

“And pacts are about trading authority, right?” Jason asked and tossed the tablet back onto the ground. “I just so happen to have some, burning a hole in my pocket.”

A NEW MAN

“YOU ARE BREATHTAKINGLY PRESUMPTUOUS,” SHAKO TOLD Jason.

“Of course I am,” Jason told him. “Have you not been paying attention?”

Jason and the two dimension-travelling diamond-rankers were talking outside of his cloud house. Jason couldn't sense the various eavesdroppers from the local factions because of his injured state, but he knew they were listening avidly.

“Jason, this isn't how it works,” Dawn told him. “You can't just join in a pact between great astral beings.”

“No? Then what are you two even doing here? Look at you both. Former prime vessels of two different great astral beings, and you're hanging out with the likes of me. They apparently even let this guy out of space jail so his boss could have a chat.”

“Speaking with a great astral being is one thing, Jason, but placing yourself in their circle is another. Shako is right; it's a height of presumption that I never imagined anyone reaching.”

“Tough,” Jason said. “I'm sick of being a meeple in the board game for sky wizards.”

Jason grimaced from the pain of using his mana as the wall behind him opened to reveal the room inside. He stepped into the room and held up the tablet containing the authority he had looted from the Builder's magic door.

“I know your bosses won’t let me keep this,” he said. “But I don’t think they’re allowed to just take it either. So, if they want to come to the table and talk, knock on my door. Otherwise, I need to get rid of this, so I’m going to see what I can do with it.”

“Jason,” Dawn said, frustration mixing with worry in her expression. “That would be a bad idea if you were in full health, let alone now.”

The wall closed again, separating Jason from the others. The diamond-rankers knew there was nothing to do but wait for directions from their respective masters.

“You’re starting to see why I killed him, aren’t you?” Shako asked.

“Sending you here has only complicated things further,” she said. “Handling Jason is delicate at the best of times, without getting you involved. What can the Builder possibly have to say, and why would the Sundered Throne allow it when there is a pact in place?”

“Does your great astral being consult you on its intentions? Mine just tells me what to do. It told me to come here and speak to you and Asano, not what it has to say or why.”

“Me as well?”

“Yes. What is the World-Phoenix telling you?”

“To convince Asano not to listen to you or the Builder, and then leave.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?”

“I could. If I asked Jason, as his friend, to send you away without hearing the Builder out, then he would.”

“Will you?”

“No. Because he knows that I would be doing it for the World-Phoenix and not for him, and that’s not how it works with friends.”

“You consider that infant a friend? You’ve had assignments that lasted longer than his entire life. You’ve

finished walking the path. You're on the cusp of claiming your own authority, leaving the last of your mortality behind and reaching true transcendence."

"That's exactly the point, Shako. The World-Phoenix knew that I was not as ready as I had believed. I needed to reconnect with my mortality in order to realise what I would be giving up. And it was right; I wasn't ready. I'm still not."

"If you're not, then what hope do the rest of us have?"

"Forever is a long time, Shako. In the scale of the cosmos, we are no less children than Jason. That is why he and I can be friends. He is very good at showing you the joys of the short-lived."

"If you say so. If you can't do what the World-Phoenix asked of you, what will happen?"

"The World-Phoenix trusts my judgement. And I have moved past my time as a prime vessel; I am a hierophant now. While I continue to serve, I no longer stand amongst the servants. I am my own agent, choosing my own path. Sometimes that means serving my own ends, and not just those of the World-Phoenix."

"Something to look forward to," Shako said. "My time as the prime vessel came to an end early, but when I am done here, I will return to the Sundered Throne's confinement. I will not join the ranks of the hierophants for a very long time."

He smiled, weary but hopeful.

"At least these events will be behind us."

"Why does Asano irk you so much? I know that Asano's aura is like a taunt, but surely you aren't so weak-minded as to let that govern you."

"Asano's aura is no longer repellent," Shako said. "The Fundament Gate he took from the Builder is gone. Sensing his aura is no longer like scraping a nail down a chalkboard. But can you really tell me that this jumped-up mortal doesn't irk you?"

“We are all still mortal, Shako. At least a little. But there has to be more to it than that.”

“Yes,” Shako said. “Far more to it. You know how it is when the great being’s influence leaks through to you.”

“Yes. But what makes the Builder...”

Dawn trailed off.

“That’s why not,” Shako said. “The World-Phoenix just told you not to ask, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” Dawn said with a frown. “It’s keeping things from me. I know there are things that are not mine to know, but this feels different. Like deception.”

“Ah,” Shako said. “I believe I’ve figured out why the Builder sent me here. It wants me to explain something to you and Asano, but knows the World-Phoenix won’t let me. So it will take the chance of reclaiming the lost authority to do so itself. Your World-Phoenix can’t stop that because Asano won’t listen to it. But he’ll listen to you, so it told you to stop me.”

“I’m not going to do that,” Dawn said. “The privilege of being a Hierophant is that I do not have to put aside my own principles anymore. I have the power to say no. But I won’t go against the World-Phoenix entirely. I won’t stop you from speaking with Asano, but I won’t listen to what your master has to say either.”

The pair shared a long look, each realising that their masters had decided on how to go forward.

“Or maybe I will,” Dawn said.

Inside the cloud house, Dawn found Jason sprawled on a cloud couch, his face twisted as he waited for the pain to fade. Dawn gave him a flat look as she entered the room and he slung his legs off the couch to make room beside him.

“What did you do?” she asked as she settled into the fluffy cloud furniture.

“I tried to open up the portal to my spirit realm.”

Jason’s spirit domain was the area over which he held dominion. This included the cloud house, as well as two areas back on Earth. His spirit realm was a linked but separate concept. An otherworldly pocket reality, it shared many traits of an astral space, but existed within Jason himself; not in terms of location but by being an aspect of his soul.

Originally, the spirit realm had been an almost metaphorical space of the spirit, in which only Jason and his familiars could enter. When Jason’s body and soul merged to become an entity both physical and spiritual, his spirit realm took on physical properties, allowing others to enter, like an astral space. Operating between what did and didn’t exist, it was utterly inviolable and only accessible through portals opened by Jason himself.

“What did I tell you?” Dawn scolded. “With the state you are in, your spirit realm will be a ruin right now. There’s no telling what damage you could suffer if you actually managed to open it.”

“You may have noticed,” Jason said through gritted teeth, “that my days of being a small fish in a very big pond are coming to a middle. I keep jumping hurdles, certain that over the next one will be some mythical realm where I’m not constantly confronted with powers that could annihilate me in a heartbeat. Except that every hurdle turns out to be a cliff and I just fall down deeper.”

“Jason—”

“I’m done telling myself they’re hurdles, Dawn. I’m done feeling sorry for myself and looking for some future that will never come. I’m going to jump off every damn cliff that comes my way, eyes open. It’s long past time to nut up and accept that it’s never going to change until I can tell people like you and Shako and the creepy space monsters you work for to climb on their bikes and pedal off.”

Dawn sighed, looking at him with pity.

“Good,” she said. “I’d like to tell you it won’t always be like this, but we both know better. You’ll get a respite, but what comes after will be worse. I still can’t tell you what it is, and you may come to hate me for that. You’ve already lost the next fight without realising that you’ve been fighting this whole time.”

“I’ve been pretty aware that I’ve been fighting.”

“Not this fight. You don’t see it, and I am expressly forbidden from showing you.”

She bowed her head.

“Were you really going to try and use the authority?”

“There’s a movie I quite like,” Jason said. “You know what genetic engineering is, right?”

“Yes.”

“This movie is set in a time where the first generation of designer children have grown up and all but displaced ordinary people in the workplace. The superior people...”

Jason pointed at Dawn.

“...have all but completely displaced the vanilla humans.”

He pointed at himself.

“Jason—”

“Just listen to the story. Those who were strong got everything, while the rest were denied the chance to even try. The story centres on a man who was conceived in the old way, while his younger brother was genetically refined to be superior. As the two brothers grew up, they would play a game where they would swim as far as they could into the water, and whoever turned back first would lose. The point was that they had to make sure they had enough energy to make it back to shore when they finally turned around. If they pushed too hard, they might get exhausted and drown.”

“Jason—”

“I said listen to the story.”

“I know the story, Jason. The only time the weaker brother ever won was when he decided to keep going, without saving anything to swim back. You’re talking about the resolve it requires to beat those who have every advantage over you.”

“You’ve seen *Gattaca*?”

“I saw it with you. Your sister made blue coconut daiquiris and her husband sketched out how to modify an insulin pump to work as a discreet urine delivery system.”

“Oh yeah. That was a good night.”

“I understand what you are saying, Jason. That for someone like you to beat out someone like Shako, you must resolve yourself to go further than he will, even if it kills you.”

“And that’s not even for a guaranteed win. It’s barely enough to get me a seat at the table. People like you and Shako can see right through my aura. The only way I can bluff him is to not bluff. I have to be willing to commit, regardless of the consequences, if I want him to fold his hand and do what I need him to do.”

Dawn let out a resigned sigh.

“You know this is why powerful people keep dragging you into things, right? It’s not that you do things others can’t, but things they won’t. When you first passed through the deep astral, your soul trailing along the link between your world and this one, the World-Phoenix gave you a tablet. It was one of countless seeds planted to move this situation in the direction it wanted. You’re the seed that sprouted, and your continued growth in the face of harsh conditions is why so many beings are paying attention to what remains a frail, fragile sapling.”

“I’m not so sure that’s flattering.”

“Jason, there are very few people I’ve encountered that I would consider truly remarkable. Genuinely, just a few. A man who conquered a world obsessed with war using only his words. A woman who became diamond rank barely ten years older than you are now. A man who confronts great astral beings with so little power, it may as well be none and he

keeps winning anyway, reshaping worlds and claiming power that should belong to the gods.”

She gave him a bright-but-sad smile, her ruby eyes sparkling.

“I’ve warned you that you can’t win the fight to come. That you’ve already lost. Doing anything about the aftermath is impossible.”

Her smile widened as she snorted a soft laugh.

“But I’ve watched you do the impossible before, Jason. You’re already like nothing I’ve ever seen. All the things you’ve been through have made you powerful in ways that are more than just essence abilities. I’m going to leave you soon, but I want you to keep devouring whatever the cosmos throws at you. Whatever they use to try and stop you, take it and turn it into your strength.”

“You’re talking about this mysterious danger that you and Noreth keep refusing to tell me about.”

“Yes. You have no chance to succeed at what lies ahead of you, Jason. But I want you to anyway. I have no idea how you can, but that’s your area. The best I can do is give you the chance to figure it out for yourself.”

Jason turned to Dawn and clasped her in a hug. She was startled; it was such a simple gesture, but she hadn’t felt such simple, physical reassurance since long before Jason was born.

“You have a lot of magic, don’t you?” he asked her. “You’re very tingly.”

Dawn’s laughter was like the tinkling of water through a creek, beautiful and refreshing.

Jason and Dawn both looked refreshed as they came down the stairs of the cloud house. The stairs and large gothic arch were a remnant of the dark temple state the cloud house had been in, and they emerged looking almost like different people. Jason

especially was a new man in a casual but elegant white suit, from the collection made for him by Alejandro Albericci. No longer hunched, he moved slowly but casually, his characteristic look of general amusement once more in place.

Walking down the stairs by his side, Dawn had also made an outfit change, to a simple yellow summer dress. Her brilliant red hair was no longer shining like fire, instead spilling down her back in a rich, dark auburn.

“I didn’t expect that to help my recovery so much,” Jason said. “Did you know that would happen?”

“I did not. I feel a little strange myself.”

“Of course you do. That’s the Jason Asano guarantee.”

She gave him a sideways look and he threw his head back, laughing. Shako looked up at them from just outside the arch, at the edge of Jason’s spirit domain. His suspicious gaze moved back and forth between them.

“You were meant to go in and bring him back out.”

“Which I did,” Dawn said as she and Jason arrived in front of Shako.

“You were *just* meant to bring him out, not to—”

“Stop for lunch?” Jason asked and pulled a plate from his inventory. It contained steaming, ring-shaped objects in a deep-fried crust and sprinkled liberally with white and brown powder.

“Argy fruit fritters,” Jason said. “A personal twist on a local favourite. The powder is smoked and ground calcat root and desiccated, powdered gleamberries. The result is quite similar to cinnamon sugar, but with more of a rich, earthy taste.”

“I’m not here to eat,” Shako said.

“Shako, show some graciousness and let the man be a host.”

Shako looked startled for a moment.

“You’re right,” he said, to Jason’s surprise. “You are, indeed, the host, Mr Asano, and some proprieties should be observed.”

“Prison food not great?” Jason asked.

“No,” Shako glowered. “It is not.”

He claimed one of the fritters between his thumb and forefinger to minimise contact with the powder. He took what Jason considered to be an oddly delicate bite and his eyebrows went up.

“This is not entirely terrible.”

NEGOTIATING POSITION

WHILE DAWN AND SHAKO STOOD EATING FRITTERS FROM THE plate he had handed over to Dawn, Jason prepared for his imminent discussion. A floor of white cloud substance extended from the wall of the cloud house, covering the grass like a plush carpet. Three chairs rose up, facing each other in a triangle formation, with a small table in the middle. Each participant claimed a chair, the plate going onto the table.

Jason had extended the area outside of the spirit domain that made up the interior of his cloud house. He was unsure if the great astral beings could still possess their vessels, Dawn and Shako, within its confines. He had no intention of finding out, having an instinctive understanding that inviting them inside would be extremely dangerous to him.

Jason mused on the nature of exclusion and domain, which he was increasingly realising was a fundamental aspect of magic. Even the most powerful beings in the cosmos could not violate the sanctity of a soul, even one belonging to the weakest and most lowly mortal. Similarly, Jason's spirit domain was able to exclude beings powerful enough to annihilate the planets his domains rested on.

"The Builder has agreed to meet with you and discuss the nature of the pact," Shako told Jason.

"As has the World-Phoenix," Dawn added.

"And what of the Reaper?" Jason asked. "He was part of this pact, right?"

“We don’t know,” Dawn said. “He is aware of this discussion and will send a representative or not. So long as the Builder and the World-Phoenix agree and it doesn’t affect the Reaper’s interests, the pact can be amended without the Reaper’s involvement.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “So, what can I expect?”

“What you see will not be us, and it will not be the great astral beings,” Dawn explained. “It will be the great astral beings through us—neither us nor them, yet somehow both. Something new, created by a middle state between mortal and transcendent.”

“Yeah, I met the Thadwick version of the Builder. Still a petty tool bag, but better at hiding it, at least. How do we start?”

In an instant, the body language of Dawn and Shako shifted. Shako went stiff, his posture rigid. Dawn became more languid, rolling her neck and shoulders with a slight grunt. Shako’s eyes had become dark brown orbs, while Dawn’s now swirled with yellow and orange, glowing like fire. Jason’s senses were not at their best, but there was no mistaking the power of the auras now exuding from their bodies. Being so close to them, contained within their vessels, felt like being in front of a nuclear reactor, behind a safety screen. The power within was contained but, if unleashed, would trigger a level of annihilation that would change maps.

Jason hadn’t felt that level of power when he met the Builder previously, when he used Thadwick as a vessel. He was unsure if that was a factor of Thadwick being a far weaker vessel or Jason’s aura senses at the time being undeveloped. Compared to that time, Jason’s senses and the Builder’s vessel were now both orders of magnitude more powerful.

Jason was holding the tablet containing the authority taken from the Builder in his hand. The power of the tablet was his, and even more so, it was somehow *him*. It was a part of him, but a deadly part, like a cancer. The sensation of threat had been growing from the moment he claimed it and had reached a point that was beginning to feel dangerous.

Just possessing authority was something he was not ready for and it would likely destroy him if he didn't get rid of it in relatively short order. He suspected that this was what burned through vessels so quickly, but at least this was not an intruding force, like being possessed by a great astral being. It truly belonged to him, so it wasn't devouring him like an aggressive parasite.

Jason felt the authority react to the two great astral beings possessing Dawn and Shako. It resonated with them, giving Jason insights into how authority, and the great astral beings that were made of it, functioned. He suspected he was no more meant to have that knowledge than the power that made it possible.

"Let's not bugger about," Jason said. "I can't keep this thing and you can't let me keep it. But I just can't give it up either, can I? That's what your boy Shako didn't understand: that it has to be traded. You really need to better inform your staff. Hold some meetings. Workflow synergy, that kind of stuff."

"Yes," the Builder said, his voice like the grinding of stone. "Authority must be traded."

"I have to say, you're much more impressive in your own car," Jason told him. "Last time you were in a rental, and that thing was clapped out."

"Didn't you just say you weren't going to bugger about?" the World-Phoenix asked.

Jason looked her up and down, his expression surprised but not dissatisfied.

"I lie frequently and transparently," he told her. "You're a lot more sultry than I expected. You've really dug out the fun side Dawn keeps locked away, haven't you?"

"Dawn is my former prime vessel," the World-Phoenix said. "Even the most powerful and well-prepared vessel can only contain a shard of my being for so long before it starts to break down. This will likely be the last time my servant ever

channels me, and elements of her mind and soul may become prominent in ways they otherwise would not.”

“Then I’m honoured,” Jason said with uncharacteristic sincerity. “Whatever you and I have going on, serving you means a lot to her and I respect that.”

“You don’t need to ply me with sentiment, Asano. I don’t care about your feelings.”

“But Dawn does, and of the two of you, she’s the one I actually care about.”

A smile curled the corner of the World-Phoenix’s lips.

“She became more attached to you than anticipated. I thank you for reminding her of her mortality.”

“You’re welcome. But while she and I are friends, you and I have an arrangement predicated on mutual benefits and shared agendas.”

“Yes. You have proven a viable means to forestall the worst ramifications of what the Builder’s predecessor has done.”

“And you organised for me and my friend to come back to life. Thank you for that.”

“I am at the limit of what I can accomplish in that regard. I helped direct the changes you have gone through, but those changes are beyond my influence now. What you do with that power is for you to decide. The consequences of those decisions are for you to endure.”

“I know. The buck stops here. This guy owes me a life, though.”

“I owe you nothing,” the Builder said.

“Your bloke slapped my head off while running errands for you.”

“He was punished. A price was paid.”

“Not to me.”

Jason's words were soft yet the world seemed to tremble. The cloud house behind him rapidly shifted as a portion of Jason's authority was consumed to change it. It was unintentional on Jason's part—a reflexive action made in quiet anger, and the price was high. Jason felt like his insides were on fire.

Rippling like water, the house shifted from an architectural chimera to a looming pagoda made of dark crystal. Within the crystal, blue, gold and silver light swirled and sparkled. It was the same design that existed at the heart of his permanent spirit domains, on Earth.

“You should not be spending your authority,” the Builder said impassively.

“No kidding,” Jason growled through gritted teeth as his fingers dug into the armrests of his cloud chair. His whole body felt like it was on fire and he realised that he was his own vessel.

“Are you able to continue?” the World-Phoenix asked, sounding more like Dawn than she had moments earlier.

“Yeah,” Jason croaked. “That was rough, but I've had worse. Ask this guy about how we met.”

“You need to trade that power away before it kills you,” the Builder said.

“Yep,” Jason agreed.

“You're not in much of a negotiating position, Asano,” the World-Phoenix told him.

“But I am in *a* negotiating position.”

“Yes,” the World-Phoenix acknowledged. “At your rank, that is relatively unusual.”

“Only unusual?”

“You may have stumbled across a little of our power, but the cosmos is still more vast than you can comprehend. You're not that special.”

“You sound like my mum. But I have a seat at the table now.”

“And now that you do,” the Builder said, “what will you do with it? What do you want?”

“A few things. Nothing big for the likes of you, but big for the likes of me. Then you get my tiny scrap of authority and I get to not have it melt me.”

“State your requests,” the Builder said.

“I need to finish what I started,” Jason said. “But I’m going to need a little assistance because I broke your toys.”

“Reckless,” the Builder said.

“I’m not the one who broke the planet. That was one of your lot sodding about, and I’m the fool you roped in to clean up your messes. So maybe keep your dismissive comments to yourself.”

“That was my predecessor.”

“And task one should have been fixing the reason you got the job in the first place, yet here we are. I have a plan to figure out finishing the dimensional bridge, but I can’t access the fundamental realm to mess with reality and anchor it anymore. I need someone to open the way for me. Just once, when the time comes.”

“Acceptable,” the Builder said.

“Acceptable,” the World-Phoenix echoed.

“Great, making progress,” Jason said and turned his gaze on the Builder. “The next thing is about your forces on this planet. I want them gone. Today.”

“The fragment of authority you hold is not enough that you can dictate my actions.”

“Your boy killed me. Then he tried to do it again.”

“That has been resolved.”

“You paid a price to who? Dawn’s boss here? The Reaper?”

Jason bared his teeth in a wolf's grin, growling his next words.

“You have a debt to me.”

“I owe you nothing.”

“I will accept Asano's proposal that you withdraw from this world immediately,” the World-Phoenix said. The Builder turned to glare at her, and the smile she returned him was laden with provocation.

“I do not accept,” the Builder said, turning back to Jason. “You have no leverage, Asano. You will take what we are willing to give and be grateful for it, or the authority will kill you.”

“Is that so? Then I might as well see what I can do with it on the way out. Come on out, lads.”

Jason's familiars emerged from the cloud house, assembling behind him in a row. Shade was a figure of living shadows with the silhouette of a butler. Colin was in his blood clone form, looking like a sculpture of Jason made by pouring blood into a mould and waiting for it to set. Gordon was the most alien, being a cloak draped over a swirl of nebulous energy that looked like an eye. He was orbited by six orbs that looked like smaller nebula eyes, captured inside spheres.

“What are your intentions?” the Builder asked.

“Shade here was a bit vague, saying I wasn't really ready to operate on this level, but he told me why familiars let themselves be summoned. It's authority. Astral beings run on it, don't they? Most of them will be operating on fumes compared to you lot, but still. And being a familiar generates it, somehow, doesn't it? Probably not a lot, but not everyone is a great astral being, are they? A little probably goes a long way.”

“You would give the authority to these beings?” the Builder asked.

“You can't give authority,” Jason said. “That's why we're having this discussion. I think I can swing handing it over as a performance bonus, though. It might be pushing the rules a

little, but isn't that the prerogative of a mortal? You seem to get away with it enough, and you aren't even mortal anymore."

"You would give it to the Reaper's child?" the World-Phoenix asked, her voice not complaining but curious. "The others I understand. They are young and have bound themselves to you permanently, becoming the voices of your will. But the Reaper's child could take the power and abandon you. He is older than the human race on your planet and you aren't even thirty. You think you have his full measure?"

Jason waved the tablet in his hand.

"I know this authority matters to you and I mean nothing. But it goes the same way back: I don't care about it beyond using it to get what I want. And if what I want is to thank my friend, I will. I don't need his full measure. If Shade wants to take this authority, bunk off and leave an intern in his place, that's fine. He'll still be my friend, and with the friend he's been to me, he more than deserves it."

Jason could hide nothing from the senses of the great astral beings. Anything less than complete sincerity and they would have felt it immediately.

"I probably can't use this authority myself without it killing me, but finally giving this lot their back pay won't hurt me at all, I'm guessing. Which you knew, but didn't bother to tell me. Otherwise, I might think I'm not in such a crappy negotiating position, right?"

"The Reaper's spawn told you," the Builder said.

"Actually, he didn't. He could have come sniffing after it, like a dodgy third cousin after you win the lottery, but he didn't say anything. Even when I personally think he should have. He likes to keep things from me. For my own good."

"And you still trust him enough to give it to him anyway?"

"I'd say in a heartbeat, but none of us have hearts. I think there's an important metaphor there. But the point is, I'm not stuck with whatever crappy options you two put on the table. So, back to you pulling out of this planet early, Builder."

“No.”

“Look, you’ve already plundered most of the astral spaces you’re going to get from this world. At this stage, you’re running out the clock on the monster surge before you have to pack up anyway, hoping to scoop up some dregs. It’s not a lot to give up for you, but it means less people die fighting, which is a lot to me. Plus, I’ll even listen to whatever it is you sent Shako here to tell me in the first place. Agree to pull out, I’ll hand over all the authority and it’s a done deal. Then we can have that chat.”

“Accepted,” the Builder said immediately. “Deal struck.”

“No,” the World-Phoenix said, sitting forward in her chair.

“Too late,” the Builder told her. “You have already accepted.”

“There was an addendum to the terms.”

“No. The terms were struck and Asano and I decided to have a conversation after. It is a separate issue and the bargain is made.”

The World-Phoenix silently looked at the Builder. After a moment, his face twisted with rage.

“ASANO!”

Jason didn’t see the Builder or the World-Phoenix move. Like a video skipping frames, suddenly, they were in front of him, leaning over the coffee table as the World-Phoenix held the Builder back.

“Quickly!” the World-Phoenix yelled at Jason. “Feed the authority to your familiars. If he has no reason to be here, he’ll be forced to leave his vessel. It’s the terms he reached with the Sundered Throne.”

Feeling the Builder’s palpable fury, Jason was about to follow the World-Phoenix’s directions when he stopped. The tablet flew from his hand to touch the Builder and Jason transferred the authority to him. He immediately felt the Builder’s presence vanish and Shako dropped to his knees, trembling.

“Bargain made, bargain complete,” Jason told the World-Phoenix as she turned to look at him.

“That is not what I told you to do.”

“Not doing what I’m told is kind of my thing. I’m sure Dawn can tell you all about it. And maybe you can tell her what you just did to the Builder. That was you that sent him berserk, right? I’m pretty sure you being able to do that isn’t normal. What is it that he wants me to know, and why you don’t want me to know it?”

She smiled.

“The things that make you useful also make you trouble.”

“I think you just titled my memoir.”

“Or your epitaph.”

“It’s a good line, either way. And now the deal is struck, so it’s time for you to go.”

“You don’t have questions for me? It’s a rare chance.”

“Whatever games we’d play, you’d win. Give me my friend back.”

“Not many have the courage to dismiss a great astral being, Asano.”

“I bet there are, but you blow most of them up.”

The World-Phoenix grinned and then her face went blank. Dawn’s eyes turned from fiery orbs to their usual ruby red. She staggered slightly, Jason supporting her and helping her into a chair. He transformed it onto a couch and sat next to her as she leaned into him, exhausted.

“Are you alright?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” she told him.

“He seems less alright,” he told her, and they turned to look at Shako. He was still on his knees, looking catatonic. “I think whatever your boss did to the Builder did a proper number on him.”

“Fortunately, the Sundered Throne sealed the majority of Shako’s power, even as a vessel,” Dawn explained. “It allowed the World-Phoenix to suppress him easily.”

“Sure, but she’s also the one that set him off in the first place. How did she do that?”

“I don’t know,” Dawn said, her expression troubled. “If I did, I very much doubt I would be allowed to tell you.”

“And here was me just starting to like your boss. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yes. It’s just been an increasing strain over the last few decades, which is why I trained a replacement.”

“I can’t imagine. You’ve been doing a job on the kind of time scale they use for civilisations and now it’s over. That’s so far out of my experience, I have trouble even empathising enough to be supportive.”

“If you live long enough, Jason, you realise that change is inevitable. Even the force that creates universes changed.”

“You’re not *that* old, are you?”

“No,” she said with a laugh, and slapped him playfully on the arm.

They leaned back into the plush couch.

“So, what now?”

“You made your deal. The Builder’s forces will leave this world. Today.”

“Good,” he said, the tension visibly leaving his body.

“You just saved a lot of lives, Jason.”

“I’m an adventurer. It’s the job.”

“What you just did is not what adventurers do.”

“Hey, I don’t tell you how to flit about the cosmos giving quests to rakishly charming outworlders, so you don’t tell me how to fight evil. Speaking of which, what do we do about this guy?”

They both looked at Shako.

“Should we draw something on his face before he comes to?”

NO POINTS OF CONFLICT

JASON'S CLOUD HOUSE HAD UNDERGONE YET ANOTHER transformation when he accidentally spent some of the authority he had taken from the Builder on it. It was currently in the form of a pagoda made from smoky crystal, which was dark but for speckles of gold, silver and blue light dancing within it. It was the same as the pagodas at the heart of Jason's permanent spirit domains on Earth.

- You have infused the [Cloud Flask] with authority possessing dimension and construction aspects. [Cloud Flask] has connected to the authority of your spirit realm.
- Cloud constructs created by the flask will have enhanced defence against physical and dimensional incursion.
- Your ability to influence the fundamental rules of reality within the temporary spirit domains of cloud constructs is increased, matching your ability to do so in permanent spirit domains.

In the moment, Jason had added the message to the growing list of system windows he had minimised. After checking some of them and being frustrated that he couldn't fully explore the ramifications in his weakened state, he had put

them off until he was stronger. There were also more important issues at hand.

“Someone on this planet needs to invent permanent markers,” Jason said, leaning down to peer at Shako’s blank face from up close. “Do you have something I can draw on him with?”

“Jason.”

“Yes, Dawn?”

“Do not draw on Shako’s face.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not nine. Or in a fraternity.”

“Fine,” Jason complained. “Are you sure he’s going to be alright? I think whatever your boss did to him messed him up pretty bad.”

“No, I’m not sure. But I don’t think the World-Phoenix did something to Shako. I think she did something to the Builder, and that change affected the vessel he was inhabiting.”

“He went totally berserk.”

Jason sat back down on the cloud couch, sitting just outside of his spirit domain. They looked at Shako, still sitting on his knees in blank-faced catatonia.

“What is going on with the Builder?” he asked. “I’ve met him a few times now, and it’s like there’s two of him. One is calm and impassive, while the other is petty and hot-headed. Childish, even. I thought it was about using Thadwick as a vessel, especially after talking to you about it, but there’s more to it.”

“Shako has been erratic while channelling the Builder,” Dawn agreed, joining Jason on the couch. “Like you, I put it down to vessel bleed-through, but after this...”

Jason gave her a sympathetic look.

“Your boss came out of that looking pretty shady.”

“I know. But the World-Phoenix feels no need to explain itself, so it doesn’t, even if doing so could eliminate a simple misunderstanding. If others think the worst of it, it doesn’t care. If a mountain climber’s shoes are untied, that doesn’t matter to the mountain.”

“First the God of Purity isn’t the God of Purity, and now this? What’s going on with all these transcendent beings?”

“I don’t know. But it implies trouble.”

“No kidding. Do you know what sanctioning is?”

“More than you I imagine, but not really. Just as the greater secrets of gold and diamond ranks are kept from you, the secrets of transcendence are kept from me.”

“Wait, there are greater secrets of gold and diamond rank?”

“No.”

“There are, aren’t there? No one tells me anything. I should refuse to save the world anymore until people start telling me things.”

“Why were you asking about sanctioning?”

“What? Oh, well, they sanctioned the original Builder, right? What if sanctioning is taking someone and slapping a new person over the top, like painting dogs playing poker over a masterpiece?”

“You need to stop watching heist movies.”

“No, I don’t. Anyway, what if the paint in my metaphor is starting to wear thin? Maybe the old Builder is starting to poke through and it’s driving the new one bonkers?”

“Bonkers?”

“Bananas. Fruit loops. Too many dips into the nut bag. Why are all these euphemisms for being crazy food? Do we have any of those fritters left?”

He looked around, seeing the plate he had left on the table now on the grass in pieces. The clash between the vessels of the Builder and World-Phoenix had sent it flying.

“That’s a waste,” he said. Jason’s familiars were still present and Shade started cleaning up the pieces of broken plate.

“I’ll be quite thorough, Mr Asano. The neighbourhood children do like to play on the grass here, by the river.”

The river running next to Jason’s house spilled off the cliff in a waterfall. Shako had broken the magical barrier that stopped children from going over the edge, though.

“Thank you, Shade. Make sure no children play in the river until the barrier is restored.”

“Should I inform Mayor Pelli?”

“I have a sneaking suspicion she knows, but go ahead and make sure, thank you.”

One of Shade’s bodies went off and Dawn joined Jason in watching another pick up the broken pieces of plate.

“There weren’t any fritters left,” she said. “Shako ate most of them.”

They looked at Shako again.

“Is someone going to come pick him up, or was it a released-on-your-own-recognisance kind of deal?”

“A representative of the Sundered Throne has already been watching us for a while. Haven’t you, Carmen?”

The air high above the pagoda shimmered and an entity appeared. It was the size of a person and looked like a cloak drifting in the air, filled with nebulous energy. It looked similar enough to Gordon that Jason glanced at his familiar, but there were notable differences. The nebula inside did not look like an eye but a mountain. The colours were more subdued, with shades of dark brown and pale blue. Like Gordon, smaller representations of the nebula were inside orbs that circled the entity as it descended through the air. Compared to Gordon’s six, this entity had twelve of the orbs.

Jason’s senses were a little recovered after exchanging energy with Dawn earlier, but he could not sense the aura of the descending entity. When it spoke, it did so by manipulating

sound waves with tremulations from one of its orbs. The voice reverberated, like a person speaking through a tube.

“Your senses have grown sharp, Dawn. Will you be making the transition soon?”

“Soon, Carmen. Only a decade or so.”

She glanced at Jason, then back to the entity.

“I have one last errand.”

The entity, Carmen, reached ground level and one of her orbs floated over to Jason.

“So, this is the mortal the World-Phoenix chose for you. He’s a bit of an oddity, but I suppose he’d have to be. It would not give you anyone ordinary.”

Carmen’s voice came from the orb in front of Jason.

“Greetings, outworlder. I am Carmen of the Sundered Throne.”

“G’day. I’m Jason of... I don’t know anymore, if I’m being honest.”

“Being otherwise would be pointless.”

“Are you a friend of Dawn’s?”

“We move in similar circles, but are more friendly than friends. There is a requisite detachment with my role.”

“I can respect professionalism.”

“And I can respect kindness.”

An orb floated over to Gordon and joined the orbs floating around him.

“You have taken good care of this child,” Carmen said.

“He’s taken good care of me.”

“You are unlike most essence users that take my kind as familiars. They are happy to use them, but never think to love them.”

“Relationships based around mutual benefits are exhausting. I like friendship. And trust.”

A trilling sound came from Carmen's orbs and Jason realised she was laughing. The orb near Gordon and Jason flew back to resume its orbit of Carmen.

"Your master certainly found you an interesting one, Dawn. I wonder if perhaps it might regret it by the time all is done."

"Jason and the World-Phoenix have no points of conflict."

"And he does have trouble enough ahead, doesn't he?"

An orb flew back to Jason.

"Would you like me to tell you what Dawn is keeping from you, Jason Asano?"

"No."

"No?"

"I trust that she's doing it for a reason."

"There is so much about her you don't know."

"I don't know a lot about aeroplanes either, but I fly around in them just fine."

"Mr Asano, you were in a plane that exploded," Shade pointed out.

"And I was fine, thank you, Shade."

Orbs flew out to examine Jason's other familiars: Shade and the blood-clone form of Colin.

"Still out exploring I see, Shade."

"As ever, Miss Carmen."

"As ever? Umber told me that he had you trapped in some astral space for a few centuries. He said it was to teach you a lesson about duty."

"Umber likes to play games when my power is limited by a vessel, thinking that it somehow brings him esteem. He fails to grasp the nuances that differentiate duty, loyalty and obedience. He would do well to attend a butlering school."

Carmen let out a trilling laugh.

“Your new companions seem to have bet it all on Asano, here, but you are still unwilling to pin yourself down? Did Umber’s trick make you a little commitment-shy?”

“Umber does not enter my thinking. Colin and Gordon are young, and the young make important decisions more easily than they should.”

“Yes, they do. A shadow of the Reaper, an echo of annihilation and a world-eater. Do you know where your friend Colin comes from, Jason Asano?”

“I don’t really do background checks,” Jason said.

“The deep astral doesn’t have geography, as you would understand it, but it’s a functional metaphor. There is a region of the deep astral where the influence of two very different astral beings meet. The region of the All-Devouring Eye is where I, and your friend Gordon, come from, and it abuts the realm of Legion, the great astral being whom administers the cosmic rules that govern life itself. Your sanguine horror comes from this place, where life and annihilation are neighbours.”

“That explains quite a lot,” Jason said, wandering over to Colin, who looked like Jason himself, but made of blood. “It doesn’t matter where he comes from, though. He’s a good boy.”

Colin opened his mouth and a horrifying alien screech came out.

“No, that does not mean you get to eat Shako. He has to go with the nice lady. Also, he’s probably a bit tough for you, until you get older. You’d just break your teeth.”

“You have a domineering collection of familiars for such an affable man, Jason Asano. Perhaps destiny knew you would need them.”

“Please tell me destiny isn’t some other great astral being I’ll have to deal with.”

Carmen laughed again. “Thankfully not.”

“Do you have to take Shako now? I have some burning questions for him, and his boss wanted to let me know something.”

“What happened to the Builder while possessing Shako will require some time to recover from. Your questions will have to wait, but I imagine you can figure out the broad strokes.”

Jason frowned. “What the World-Phoenix did to him, and how. He wanted to tell me about that, didn’t he?”

“That is not my place to say.”

An orb floated over to Shako and it turned into a shield, which Gordon’s orbs could also do. Carmen’s shield was pale blue and appeared under Shako, lifting him like a platform.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Jason Asano, Colin. Dawn, Shade, always a pleasure. Gordon, you watch out for Jason here. He has hard days ahead and seems very good at getting into trouble.”

“Who have you been talking to?” Jason asked, affronted.

Carmen laughed again.

“I do hope you survive to grow up, Jason Asano. I look forward to meeting you again at that time. As for you, Dawn, don’t dally too long. Coming to grips with your mortality is important, but so is letting it go.”

Carmen floated into the air with Shako and a portal opened into a starry void. She passed through and it closed.

“Well,” Jason said. “This has been fun. Want to do some day drinking?”

QUITE ENOUGH TRANSCENDENT BEINGS

“THAT LOOKS GOOD,” JASON SAID, EYEING OFF THE PINK liquid in the delicate crystal bottle. It sat on the low table in front of the cloud couch where Jason and Dawn were still sitting, outside of Jason’s pagoda. Jason’s own drink was a tall bottle where the liquid rested in rainbow layers, magically enchanted to retain the separation when poured into a glass.

“You just want to drink anything colourful,” Dawn responded.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“If you drank mine, it would kill you.”

“I’m pretty good at handling poison.”

“You wouldn’t have time to get poisoned. The magic in it would make your body explode.”

“I’m pretty good at handling that too.”

“The last time you handled a lot of high-grade magic, it took about eight miracles to keep you alive and now you’re too weak to do a chin-up.”

Dawn sank back into the cloud couch and sipped at her glass.

“I’m not sure if today’s events are good or bad for you,” she said. “There’s going to be a lot of people paying attention to you now.”

“You think there wasn’t before?”

“Not like this. Anyone who knows about what happened here will be wary of coming after you, but the people who do come after you will come ready.”

“I know, but what was I going to do? Out here, we get eavesdroppers, but I couldn’t do it in my... I couldn’t invite them in, as you well know.”

Knowing there were eyes and ears on them, Jason refrained from discussing his spirit domain. He was involved with too many diamond-rankers to believe it was still a secret, but he wasn’t going to go divulging further details or attracting yet more attention. Both of those ships had sailed, sunk, been salvaged and sold for scrap, but he wasn’t going to go making it worse. The events of the day had done more than enough already.

“There was a way to do this quietly,” Dawn said. “The World-Phoenix would have traded for the authority.”

“I didn’t entirely trust your boss before this,” Jason told her. “And after this, I really don’t. And it’s alright. Or maybe I should say that it’s worth it. If the Builder keeps his end and really does pack up, that’s good for everyone, not just me. It means a lot more people will make it out of this monster surge than otherwise would have. It means more time to prepare for whatever those messengers are doing, along with the remnants of Purity or Deception or whatever’s going on there.”

“Fortunately,” Dawn said, “you don’t need to be at the heart of it for once.”

“I don’t?”

“No. You’ve done your part for this world and more. You need to get the information from the messengers and establish the bridge so your world can start to recover, but I have no doubt that you and your team will accomplish this. The larger concern of actually dealing with the messenger threat is not yours to deal with. You will doubtless be involved as an adventurer, but just as an adventurer, once your own goals have been met.”

“Just an adventurer? I like the sound of that. I like it a lot.”

“For a time, yes. Enjoy these years, Jason. Take them to grow strong and find out who you are when the pressures of the world aren’t grinding you to powder. Because the day will come when those pressures come back.”

Dawn bowed her head.

“I don’t like keeping this from you. But something has to happen and you can’t be allowed to try and stop it. The price would be too high.”

“You really think I could do something you didn’t want me to?”

“More powerful entities than I have bet against you and lost, Jason. I’m not foolish enough to join them. So, I’m asking you to stop yourself. To trust me and not try to find out what’s coming. All I can offer you in return is a chance to do something in the aftermath.”

“You know I’ve already made that choice, just as I know you’ve already been working to give me that chance.”

Jason shook his head, drained his glass and poured another.

“This is turning into sad drinking,” he said, “and colourful drinks are for happy drinking.”

“I’m happy,” a third person said. “In fact, I’m downright delighted.”

A chair—more like a throne—had appeared across the table from the couch. Lounging in it was a man with a toga and a laurel wreath crown, plus a goblet held casually in one hand. Unlike the last time Jason saw him, the god was projecting the form of a celestine with brassy eyes and hair.

“I have to say, Mr Asano, today was a genuine treat for me. It’s a delight having you back.”

“Really?” Jason asked with a groan. “You’re just going to pile it on?”

“Oh, you should be grateful it’s me. The Builder is already withdrawing his forces from around the planet. Battles abandoned, airships withdrawing. Whole fortress-cities

dimension-shifting out. Guardian wants to throw you a parade.”

“Yeah, well, if one of you is called subtlety, maybe get them to have a chat with him.”

“There is, but she’s a much lower tier than Guardian. She’s also Deception’s sister and there’s a whole history with Disguise, so things are a bit complicated with the Purity affair still ongoing.”

“You actually have family relations?”

“Those of us who embody mortal concepts tend to have more mortal attributes. Knowledge, Deception, Vengeance. Me, obviously. I’m the important one.”

“Of course you are.”

Dominion chuckled.

“You’ll find that Ocean or Storm aren’t the conversationalists that I am. They are connected to the wind and the waves, whereas I am connected to people. And what is more mortal than things getting tense when the family starts talking politics?”

Jason leaned forward, head bowed as if he were going to be sick.

“Dawn, is there a third version of Earth you could drop me off on?”

“I’m afraid you still have things to take care of on this one,” Dawn said with an amused smile.

Jason groaned again.

“Don’t you have somewhere to oppress?” he asked Dominion.

“I don’t oppress,” Dominion said. “I’m just oppression-friendly.”

“Look, I appreciate you holding back your aura so I don’t get squished like an overripe peach, but I’m kind of trying to relax after a heavy day, and there’s been quite enough transcendent beings running about on my lawn. Could you go?”

Maybe tell any of your friends that I'm not really looking for visitors right now?"

"You think you're so important that gods will start just turning up?"

Jason gave him a flat look.

"Point taken," he said, with no sign of shame. "It's a little rude, but fine."

Dominion looked up at Jason's pagoda.

"I do love what you've done with the place. You're coming along nicely, Mr Asano."

The god vanished, as if he'd never been there at all.

"What next?" Jason wondered out loud. "Is my mum going to turn up?"

Almost immediately a portal opened up.

"I had to say it, didn't I?"

Jason was just revving up a stream of complaints when he realised he recognised the portal. Essence users with the same abilities often had their powers differentiated visually, even when the effects were identical. This was especially common with distinctive visual elements, such as portals. In most cases, they started out looking the same and became more unique over time.

Clive's portal ability was made distinctive by the glowing runes surrounding its edges, which were different in form and colour from other essence users with the same power. Jason's portal had likewise evolved over time. It had started as an arch of obsidian, identical to the ones in the Order of the Reaper's astral space. This was because the power had been used as a basis for the portal network there. Now Jason's arch was smoky crystal with speckled light, just like the pagoda looming over him at that moment.

Jason's team had continued to participate in the monster surge while Jason was convalescing and were returning from their latest contract. As they trudged from the portal, Jason

could see that they were caked in mangrove mud. It didn't look to have been the most fun endeavour.

"I don't know what you're complaining about," said Sophie, who was the only one not filthy. In fact, she was wearing new armour that looked like white, supple snakeskin.

"Of course you don't," Belinda said, "but not everyone can move that fast when it's shooting mud out of its... whatever that orifice was. I'm really hoping it wasn't what it looked like."

"Who can tell?" Neil asked. "It had three of them."

"I still don't understand how we looted armour that white and clean from a monster that aggressively dirty and brown," Clive said.

"I still think it's weird Sophie came out completely clean," Neil said. "Has your mum been giving you purity tips?"

"Oh, bloke, don't go there," Jason said with a wince.

"Are you looking to get slapped?" Sophie asked Neil.

"Sure," Neil said. "Are you offering?"

"You are such a sleaze," Sophie told him.

"I'm the sleaze? How's that recording crystal collection coming?"

Sophie's face took on a caught-out expression.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said quickly. "Humphrey, let's go in and I'll help you clean off."

"Is anyone else sensing some weird lingering auras?" Humphrey asked. While the others were chatting, he had been looking around.

"All I'm sensing is the dire need of a shower," Belinda said. "I can't believe that no one brought crystal wash."

"Jason normally has it," Neil said. "You know what he's like with the stuff."

"I'm not that bad," Jason said as the group all nodded their agreement with Neil. "I'm not. Look, you don't know what it's

like to be trapped in another world without any crystal wash. Dawn, you were there; tell them.”

“Oh, I had crystal wash,” Dawn said. She was still curled up on the couch with her glass of pink beverage.

“What do you mean, you had crystal wash?”

“Well, I couldn’t send my body through the dimensional membrane of your world, but I could send some crystal wash. It’s not like I was going to go without.”

“You’re telling me that whole time we were running around Earth, you had a secret stash of crystal wash?”

“Yes.”

“And you never told me?”

“I know what you’re like with the stuff.”

In a lounge that opened to a balcony in the towering pagoda, Jason and Dawn took his team and his other friends living in the cloud house through the events of the day and was told off for doing it all when the team was away.

“It’s fine,” Jason assured them. “It’s not like any of us could stand up to any of the people who showed up today in a fight.”

“But we can stand beside you,” Humphrey said.

“Beside and slightly back,” Neil clarified. “There’s no point in *all* of us getting blown up by a lightning bolt from some god.”

Belinda slapped him on the arm as Jason chuckled and then continued the story.

“And that’s when the god turned up?” Rufus asked.

“No, the... Carmen arrived first,” Jason told him.

“The Carmen?”

“She’s some kind of super-Gordon, I don’t know. I think she might be in the space police.”

“The space police?”

“Like the Green Lanterns?” Travis asked. “That’s awesome.”

“I don’t know anything about it,” Jason said. “Dawn can probably tell you.”

“I can,” Dawn said, “but unless any of you are turning into astral beings, there’s not a lot of point. Ask Shade.”

“I will refrain from providing an explanation. Every time Mr Asano learns about a vast extradimensional power, he gets it into his head to do something absurd and provoke it.”

“I do not!” Jason said, even as the others all nodded in agreement.

“You’re hanging out with gods,” Travis said. “The magic factions back home would think twice about stabbing you in the back if they knew that.”

“No,” Jason said. “They’d just be more careful.”

“Sad but true, bro,” Taika agreed. “Speaking of Earth, though, you need to go look in on those people that got sucked through with me and Travis. I’m pretty sure the Adventure Society would have dragged you there already if there wasn’t a monster surge on.”

“No one will be dragging him anywhere,” Dawn said. “He may not have the power that comes with being a high-ranker, but he moves in higher circles than any mortal on this world. People have to be very careful about pressuring him now.”

“But that pressure can still crush me,” Jason said. “I can’t just go around throwing other people’s weight. I tried that in Greenstone to disastrous effect. My soul almost got plundered, and if I hadn’t hidden under Emir’s skirt, Sophie would have wound up in a slave Leia costume.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Sophie said, “and I’m pretty sure you don’t want me finding out.”

“Why today?” Farrah asked. “You’re the one who called these people here, right?”

“Effectively,” Jason said. Once he took the authority out of his spirit domain, transcendent beings were able to sense its presence.

“When did you decide that today was the day to deal with the great astral beings?”

“Well, I’ve had this authority banging around since I got knocked onto my butt by the magic thing, but it’s not something I can really handle. I was talking to Dawn and—”

“Oh, that’s how it is,” Farrah said.

“No,” Jason denied firmly. “That’s not how it is.”

“It’s a little bit how it is,” Dawn said.

“That’s not helping.”

FLAVOURS OF AUTHORITY

JASON AND FARRAH STOOD AT THE BALUSTRADE OF A balcony, looking out over the water as the sky grew dark.

“You know there’s going to be an inquisition waiting for you when you leave this cloud house,” she said. “Probably the most polite inquisition ever held, but some very powerful people will have some very pressing questions.”

“I know. Dawn has gone off to lay some groundwork, but they’ve already been knocking at my door. I’ve been leaving Shade to deal with them. He knows a lot of very polite ways to tell people to sod off.”

“You can’t ignore them forever.”

“No kidding. He’s been seeing off reps from the Adventure Society, Magic Society and a hundred other organisations that I’ve never heard of. All the aristocratic families that Vesper wanted to play me off of are suddenly very interested in meeting me. The royal family, of course. I imagine Liara will come along in person, sooner or later. Maybe Soramir, but I think he’s wary of setting foot in here.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“That I was a sidekick and they should ask Dawn.”

“That’s a lie. And they’ll know it’s a lie.”

“But they won’t say it’s a lie because the reason they know it’s a lie is that they were all spying on me. That’s how politics works.”

“Dawn has seemed a bit... I don't know. Extra relaxed, maybe, despite everything going on. What did you two get up to exactly while the rest of us were off doing monster surge things?”

“Dawn will be leaving us soon,” Jason said, dodging the question. “I think she's indulging herself before she goes. Having some fun before it's back to stodgy cosmic accounting or whatever.”

“Cosmic accounting?”

“I was never really clear on what she does. I get the impression it's dealing with a lot of stoic dignity-of-the-immortal types.”

“You know it's madness out there. I was at the Magic Society with Travis when everything went crazy. We had gold-rankers trying to drag us off to answer questions about you. If Trenchant Moore hadn't shown up to get us out, it might have gotten a little rough.”

“Did he take you to Soramir?”

“No, he brought us straight here. I got the impression that whatever you did, Soramir wants you to feel some goodwill.”

“His observers were paying attention, then. No surprise there.”

“Is the Builder really just packing up because you gave him a brick?”

“It was more of a tablet. I suspect it's great astral being politics driving these events. Like most of the nonsense I'm neck-deep in, it isn't about me. I just happen to be the poor sap caught up in the games of these theme-park Cthulhu monsters. A mortal like me having stumbled into a scrap of their power is just one more point for them to play off.”

“But you had the power ever since you absorbed that magic door. Why is it an issue now?”

“Because of the nature of the power. I've been playing around with this power for a while without really understanding it. But having the raw, unrefined stuff in my

hands has given me a much better understanding of what I've been dealing with."

"This power being authority."

"Yes. Authority is the fundamental power of the cosmos and it comes in two flavours, two states in which it can operate. One state is set. The power has been put to a purpose, making it fixed and defined. Safe. Clay turned into a bowl. My spirit domains are comprised of this set-state authority. Everything in physical reality is underpinned by authority to some degree. What the Builder's door allowed me to do was enter a dimensional layer where I could access and manipulate that underpinning of authority. I didn't understand what I was doing at the time, but it was the same when I was manipulating those transformation zones. I was manipulating authority to plug holes in the universe. The result was my spirit domains."

"If your spirit domains are made of authority, doesn't that mean you've had authority in your possession ever since you established them?"

"Longer than that, even. My spirit domains are areas of influence in physical reality. But my spirit realm—my soul space—is also an aspect of authority. My authority. When I accepted that power and I changed, I became an entity capable of using—and even partially comprised of—authority. That's how I can manipulate a transformation zone. They were essentially areas where the set-state authority underpinning the region broke down."

"Like the Builder's door when you flooded yourself with magic."

"Quite similar, yes, but on a much larger scale. I needed to go in and return the authority to its set state. I was running on instinct, though, and had no idea how to turn it back the way it was. All I could do was put it back together as best I could."

"And the result was a spirit domain."

"Exactly."

"But that means the reason you have authority at all is because of that power the great astral beings gave you."

“That’s right. I only accepted that ability because I needed it to find you. It’s a grab bag of weird effects, completely unlike my other outworlder powers. I know where all those abilities come from now. Why it changed my body and soul so profoundly, and why it helped me manipulate transformation zones.”

“Then why are the great astral beings suddenly up in arms about you having authority, since they’re the ones that gave you access in the first place?”

“I knew from the start that the ability wasn’t designed for me. It was designed to look like it was, but it was always meant to make me able to do what the World-Phoenix needed me to. But I was only ever meant to have set-state authority, the first flavour I mentioned. The other state of authority is potential-state. If set-state authority is a clay bowl, potential-state authority is the unworked clay. Except the clay is actually enriched uranium.”

“That’s not good.”

“Correct. Potential-state authority is the dangerous stuff. The wield-the-power-of-the-gods stuff. Much of my understanding of authority comes from just holding potential-state authority in my hands.”

“And that’s the stuff you aren’t meant to have.”

“Think of it like this: authority with a set state is like a treehouse, and silver-ranker like me is like a child.”

“I can imagine that. Very easily.”

Jason shot her a flat look before continuing.

“Even if I, the child, strictly speaking, shouldn’t have the treehouse, the great astral beings are willing to leave it be because I can’t do a lot of damage. At worst, I might hurt myself.”

“Okay.”

“Potential-state authority is like the tools and materials you need to build a treehouse. Planks, nails, hammer, saw, power drill. Stuff that you don’t want a child to be playing with

because they'll hurt themselves very badly and do a lot of damage in the process.”

“And you don't think that treating you like a child is high-handed?”

“Not in this case,” Jason said firmly. “I felt that power and it's not something I should have. How powerful a magic item is a cloud flask?”

“Extremely. It's one of the most complex and robust items I've ever heard of.”

“I got angry for just a moment and I remade the cloud flask, just like that. Changed it on a fundamental level and I don't even understand how. When a person has that kind of power in their hands, they could do terrible, unbelievable things. It's intoxicating to feel like a god, but I'm not a god and I don't want to be. I felt the damage I could do and I've made mistakes before. Messing up with that kind of power... it shouldn't be in my hands. I don't like that it's in anyone's, because even the great astral beings are a little too like the gods of Olympus for my taste.”

“The gods of Olympus?”

“Petty, jealous, vain. The power of infinity but the flaws of a mortal.”

“I don't think they're that bad.”

“They don't have to be that bad. When their power is that great, everything they do is magnified. Bad becomes catastrophic through escalation of scale. And I'm certainly not better than them. You've seen my mistakes and failures. What they've cost. I don't want that magnified and I shouldn't have that power. Even if I was willing to keep it, I'm not built to contain the volatility of potential-state authority. If my body and soul hadn't been reformed to specifically endure those forces, it would have killed me in minutes. I'm well rid of it.”

“This authority is the core of everything, isn't it? The link between worlds, the transformation zones. Everything we were fighting for on Earth.”

“Yes. The original Builder conducted an experiment with this universe and the one I’m from, centred on Earth. He rigged it so that a planet would form, but instead of using original designs, he Frankensteined old ones to see what would happen. Then he gets the boot for smashing his toys together, forcing the World-Phoenix to repair as best she can.”

“And we get the new Builder.”

“Yep. Then, thirteen billion years later, we have Earth and Pallimustus. The same starting point, but one in a magic-rich universe and one in a magic-poor universe. Pallimustus has gods, and one of them makes a deal with the new Builder. The god recruits an outworlder, originally from Earth, and sends them back to Earth to mess with it. The Builder provides a door that allows them to fiddle with the authority governing Earth and, critically, the link between Earth and Pallimustus. Someone gave a kid the tools to modify the treehouse and he weakened the supports.”

“Pallimustus gets primed for invasion and Earth gets escalating magic that destabilises it.”

“Yep. But the Builder knows the other great astral beings will jump on him if he just lets his predecessor’s experiment blow up, especially since he interfered with the World-Phoenix’s correction measures to do so.”

“Which is why he left the door that was originally used to create the problem. That way, the damage can be fixed once the Builder has gotten what he needs from Earth. Enter you, inevitably sending his plans awry.”

“Not that awry. He still got to invade this world.”

“But you stopped the transformation zones.”

“Yeah. They were areas of set-state authority breaking down into potential-state authority. The domes were the world sealing them away, like scabs over a wound. But like scabs, there can be some nasty stuff under there. Mostly, they healed up, left some scars, but the world carried on. But some wouldn’t heal, because there was an astral space in there, agitating them as well.”

“That’s why Dawn called them dimensional ulcers.”

“Yes. That was when I had to step in and use the power World-Phoenix gave me and the Builder’s door. Without them, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything. But because I did, I was able to treat those ulcers. I didn’t realise what I was doing, though, and created spirit domains in the process. I changed the world and I changed myself.”

“But this wasn’t the authority you get in trouble for.”

“No, my domains are set-state authority. Safe. Turning the authority from potential-state to set-state was the whole point. Now it’s the treehouse that I’m allowed to play in.”

“But that authority can turn back, right? Isn’t that what happened to the Builder’s door when you accidentally trashed it for parts?”

“More or less.”

“Wouldn’t that mean that if your spirit domains were broken down in the same way, you’d get more of this potential-state authority?”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure if that happened to my domains, it would kill me.”

“What happens to the authority if you die?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’d get sanctioned, whatever that is. Or maybe I’d become an astral being, anchored to my spirit domains like a ghost.”

“Can’t Dawn tell you?”

“Even those on Dawn’s level have a limited understanding of how authority works. Shako got punted across the ocean because he didn’t know all the rules. It’s why she actually gets nervous about some of the things I’ve been doing. She did not like me having any potential-state authority.”

“But you did use some of that potential-state authority, right?”

“Only a little, by accident. I infused it into my cloud flask when I got angry.”

“Which did what?”

Jason shared a system window for Farrah to see through his party interface power.

- [Cloud Flask] has been converted to an authority artefact.
- [Cloud Flask] is a growth item. Maximum potential rank has been increased to [Transcendent].
- [Cloud Flask] has been linked to your permanent spirit domains. Your spirit domains may use properties of the [Cloud Flask] within their areas of influence.
- Your ability to influence the fundamental rules of reality within temporary spirit domains created through the [Cloud Flask] is increased, matching your ability to do so in permanent spirit domains.
- [Incomplete Portal Gate] has been repurposed and completed.
- The [Cloud Flask] can be used to open a gate from your spirit domains to your spirit realm. There are no restrictions on who can use this portal to access your spirit realm.
- Those on the threshold of your spirit realm will sense the power you will hold over them there before entering.

“The trust restriction on entering your spirit realm is gone,” Farrah said.

“Not entirely. If I open the portal myself, the restriction is still in place. If I use the cloud flask to create one, the restriction is gone. It latched on to what Clive and I were trying to do, using the cloud flask to enhance my portal ability, and used it to make a gate into my spirit realm.”

“You should still be careful about who you let in,” Farrah warned. “That place will terrify anyone who didn’t trust you

enough to get in already. Scared people make bad choices.”

“I know that better than most.”

“What was that part about influencing the physical reality within your spirit domain?”

“I think it means that I can change things the way I can within the soul space of my spirit realm.”

“It implies that you could do that even before you shoved authority into it.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “There were a lot of changes after I almost killed myself portalling everyone out of that mine. I could never test them, though, because I’m still wrecked.”

He shared another system window.

- You have forcibly unsealed the restricted effect of the title [Reality Hegemon].

Title: [Reality Hegemon]

- The maximum total size of your spirit domains is increased.
- The effect of your spirit domain on hostile intruders ignores rank disparity.
- You may influence the state of physical reality within the influence of your spirit domain. You do not meet the rank requirements to utilise this effect. **THIS EFFECT HAS BEEN FORCIBLY UNSEALED.** You may not utilise this ability across dimensional boundaries. Utilising this ability will inflict a backlash commensurate to the change enacted.

“Basically, I can remake the world, within the scope of my spirit domains. It used to say only my permanent spirit domains, but that’s gone now.”

“Remake how?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t tried using any of this stuff. Just moving around has been giving me a backlash, let alone trying to turn lead into gold or whatever. Even if I wasn’t, I can’t access my spirit domains on Earth right now.”

“Jason, if you can change things on a basic-rules-of-reality level, and anyone finds out you can do this...”

“I know. It’ll be a race to who can spirit me away for an alien autopsy faster. But I don’t think it goes that deep. If I could use it to access the node space, like the Builder’s door, I think I’d feel it. I used that door a lot, and this power is a little shallower, I think. I can probably fudge the laws of physics, but not change them.”

“That’s fine,” Farrah said, looking relieved. “Regular magic can do that. Doing it more easily and over a wide area isn’t so big a deal, since it has to be your own territory anyway.”

“So, it’s just the stuff people were already going to be chasing me down over. Hooray.”

MYTHMAKING WAS WITHIN EXPECTATIONS

WHEN JASON WOKE UP, EVERYTHING ACHED. DAWN HAD helped him recover a little, but then he went and used some of the authority he had before trading the rest away. The after-effects made his entire body feel like it had cramped up, leaving whatever he had instead of muscles feeling like a taut rubber band.

Jason pushed himself out of his cloud bed with a grunt and tried walking around the room to loosen up. His body said no, so he compromised and hobbled around the room, trying to loosen up. It didn't work as well as he would have liked, but he at least managed to make his way out and into the kitchen where Taika was frying eggs and gatchu lizard bacon. Lizards were heavily represented amongst livestock on Pallimustus, although Jason suspected they were more like lizards from Earth visually than biologically. Gatchu lizard meat was the closest local approximation to pork.

“Where’s everyone else?” Jason asked. “They don’t want breakfast?”

“Not anymore, bro. It’s mid-afternoon. You slept in pretty late.”

“Then why are you cooking breakfast?”

“Shade said you were awake and probably weren’t up to making it for yourself.”

“Thanks. I had a big day yesterday.”

“You were asleep yesterday.”

“What do you mean?”

“I may have undersold how long you were sleeping it off.”

“I slept through the whole day?”

“You slept through three whole days. Dawn said we should leave you alone because you were better off unconscious.”

Jason sat at the kitchen table, grateful once again for the soft yet supportive cloud furniture.

“Given how I feel now, she was probably right.”

Taika plated the food, which seemed to be an awful lot for just Taika and himself, but Jason could sense most of his friends weren't in the cloud house. He hoped they weren't getting harassed out in the world on his account.

“What day is it?” he asked.

“Fifthday. Wait, Fourthday? I'm still not used to the six-day week here, even if the names are super-simple.”

“Well, we named our days after gods. The gods are real here and probably frown on that kind of thing. I don't think Dominion would go along with it unless most of the days were named after him, so they probably cut their losses.”

“I don't think my mum would like all this gods shenanigans. She's pretty Christian.”

Taika's expression was sad as he put a plate in front of Jason, along with a knife and fork.

“I will get you back to her, Taika. Maybe even sooner than I thought.”

“Yeah?”

“No promises, but I might have a line on something. I'll have to see how it goes.”

Taika gave himself a second plate, then set aside a third that was twice as wide as the others and held a literal pile of bacon and eggs. Jason looked at it.

“You overestimated how hungry I'd be? Oh, wait...”

Gary came in, grinning as he sniffed the air before sitting down in front of the big plate.

“You’re up and about, then?” he asked Jason.

“Kind of,” Jason said. “I half wish I was still asleep.”

“I won’t claim to understand all this high-end magic,” Gary mumbled around a mouthful of bacon. “Give me a magic hammer and some magic iron and that’s where my interest starts and ends. But maybe wait until you’ve recovered from the last time you wrecked yourself channelling weird super-magic before doing it again.”

“That sounds like good advice, bro.”

“I’ll take it under consideration.”

Feeling helpless, Jason made his way to the top of the pagoda. It was the tallest building on the island of Arnote at five storeys and noticeably stood out in the otherwise sleepy beachside village in which it was located. Even the royal compound, housing a minor branch of the royal family, was far less prominent. Sitting on the balcony did offer commanding views of the turquoise sea, however, glistening under the tropical sun. He could see quite a distance and spotted a magic storm raging far out to sea, beyond the towers that kept them from the island.

Cloud stuff from the palace danced between Jason’s hands, held in front of him as he waggled his fingers. The cloud flask was designed to adapt itself when exotic materials were placed inside, but the authority Jason had taken from the Builder was a little beyond exotic. To anyone else, the cloud stuff seemed no different, but Jason was bonded to his cloud flask. He could feel that there had been a fundamental change in the material from which the flask created cloud constructs.

Jason was unsure of what the change would bring on a structural level, but he suspected that the cloud house would be significantly more resistant to intrusion, both physically and

through dimensional travel, like teleporting. To date, no one had attempted to force their way in and he was unsure how resilient it was. Emir had told him that each rank would make the cloud constructs harder and harder to penetrate, relative to the rank of the flask.

The modifications made by feeding things into the flask would be a large factor, and now that he had fed it authority and turned it into a spirit domain, Jason was confident in the robustness of his sanctuary. He imagined a diamond-ranker could make their way in, but it would probably even hold them off long enough for Jason to escape into his soul space. The likely exception was someone on Dawn's level, but if someone like that was seriously coming for him, there wasn't much he could do anyway.

Although he was stuck on the slow road to recovery, Jason didn't feel the kind of downward suction he had in the latter parts on his time on Earth. Then he'd been out and active, but had felt helpless, as if he were spitting into the void in the hope that it would slay a god.

Even though he could do nothing but wait, Jason felt eager and hopeful. He had a path forward and, more importantly, companions to walk it with him. Farrah had been the string that held Jason together, but at the end, she had become as frayed as he was. After the transformation zones and Dawn's departure, the two of them had methodically gone around, modifying the link between worlds so they could leave. They stopped involving themselves in the affairs of Earth and its magic factions, stayed quiet and stayed on task.

By the time they were done and ready to leave, they were both on the verge of burning out. Finally, they returned to Pallimustus, only to find themselves still isolated from their people, kept on the far side of the world by the monster surge. If not for the presence of Rufus, they might have cracked, which Jason suspected was the point. Knowledge had sensed they were at their limits and had done just enough to keep them sane so they could continue the task at hand.

Once Jason's team arrived, the healing had begun, but it wasn't like flipping a switch. Jason and Farrah both spent a lot

of time with Rufus' mother. Her expertise in mental health as a member of the Church of the Healer had guided them towards recovery. Neither of them would ever be the people who had been sent to Earth through death and resurrection, but Jason held no illusions about going back to the person he was. He lamented the loss of innocence, but he could no longer afford the naivety that had led him to make mistakes in the past.

Jason had been angry after hurting himself escaping the underwater mining complex. It was the latest in a series of events where he had been forced to push past his limits and accomplish the impossible. But as he convalesced, he had a lot of time to think. He had decided that it was time to stop waiting for his life to be anything other than a chain of events that pushed him to the brink. It was time to stop letting the cosmos break him and break it right back instead.

Jason was ready to go forward and, for the first time in a long time, was excited about what the future held. He had stopped trying to fight against being caught up in events ordinary adventurers weren't. Whatever mysterious danger awaited him, he would deal with it. From the beginning, Rufus had warned him that there was no ordinary path for an outworlder, and years down the road, he had finally accepted it.

The thought made Jason think of the outworlder supposedly in Rimaros, other than Taika, Travis, Farrah and himself. He had never gone looking, having had enough to be going on with, and always assumed he would run into them sooner or later. He wondered if maybe his convalescence was a good time to reach out. He needed to know how big a problem the revelation of recent events would be before he knew if the timing was right.

There was no question that Jason would have an unusual reputation, but what that meant was up in the air. Would it bring political clout? Paint a dangerous target on him? His guess was some of both. The real problem was one of rank. If he was a diamond-ranker, people would view things very differently. They were figures of power and mystery, so a little

mythmaking was within expectations. It was their job to become involved with gods and strange entities from beyond.

Jason pushed himself to his feet with a grunt. Inside the cloud house, he could float himself around in a cloud chair if he wanted, but moving under his own steam was good for recovery. He wanted to do some things, but he needed to wait. Rufus, Humphrey and Dawn all had various levels of political influence they could tap into to get the lay of the land, and Jason wanted to know what he was dealing with before he started crashing headlong into things.

“Maybe I’m growing as a person?”

“That would be very welcome, Mr Asano,” Shade’s voice came from Jason’s shadow.

“You say that like you don’t think it happened.”

“Mr Asano, there is a fireman’s pole running the entire height of the pagoda.”

“I said personal growth, Shade. I didn’t say anything about maturity.”

Inside the pagoda was a room with no doors or windows. It was elegantly appointed in wood, with soft light shining from points on the ceiling. There was an impossibly soft bed, a chair and reading table, and a shelf of books. It was the third iteration of room design Melody had experienced since being forced into it. She had seen stark, black stone, soft white cloud-stuff and now the latest design.

Melody was reading a book when a gap appeared in one of the walls, revealing the nature of the room as cloud-substance masquerading as wood and cloth. She set the book on the table and watched as her daughter entered, carrying a dish of fruit salad and two bowls on a tray.

While Melody returned the book to the bookshelves, Sophie set the tray down on the table and cloud-stuff rose from the floor into the shape of a second chair. It took on the

appearance of a wooden dining chair that matched the décor of the room and Sophie sat down. Having put away the book, Melody took the remaining chair.

“What were you reading?” Sophie asked.

“What is the hit television series?”

“I have no idea what that means. Why do you ask?”

“All of these books have ‘adapted from the hit television series’ written on them. I have to acknowledge that your friend Jason is an innovator; it’s not often I encounter a form of torture that even the Order of the Reaper doesn’t know. I’m still unclear on what a *Baywatch* is.”

“You seem to be holding up well,” Sophie said.

“Better than your friend, it would seem. This room has been having some trouble settling on an identity. Is Mr Asano not recovering from his ordeal?”

“He’s recovering just fine. He just got a little angry while talking with some great astral beings.”

“How fun.”

“Is there anything I can get for you?”

“A way out. This room being so inescapable has hurt my pride a little.”

“I’d have thought that finding out the god you’re so obsessed with is a fake would engage your interest more.”

“A transparent lie. When you’re not actively prattling about it, the absurd concept completely flees my mind.”

“It’s not a lie. Dominion admitted as much.”

“Oh, he popped in for a chat while Asano was talking with the great astral beings, did he?”

“It was a little after, but yes.”

Melody’s brow creased as she looked at Sophie.

“You’re being serious.”

“When it comes to Jason, you’ll find that the very serious and the very silly go hand-in-hand.”

Sophie started dishing fruit chunks into the two empty bowls on the tray.

“What shall we talk about?” Melody asked.

“The operations of your group over the last several years.”

“That’s hardly appropriate for our fun mother-daughter chat. I was more thinking boys. You’re not still with that Geller child, are you?”

DODGING THE TOPIC

JASON'S SPECTACULARLY PUBLIC ESCAPE FROM DEATH, followed by his otherworldly visitors, left Jason holed-up in his cloud house, which remained in the form of a sinister tower. With a need to both avoid the many eyes on his home and convalesce from his injuries, Jason was stuck doing very little. Between using a reality core, overextending his portal ability, getting pumped full of way too much healing magic, Jason's body was massively overtaxed.

On top of that was whatever magic Gordon had used, being some unknown form even Clive could make little of. Jason could sense that Gordon was unwilling to discuss it, as was Dawn, when he asked. All Jason could do was add it to the long list of reasons his body would take weeks to heal and that more healing magic would do more harm than good.

One of the results of this was that his team was still going out, facing the challenges of the monster surge, leaving Jason behind. Dawn kept him company for most of the day, but Jason lived for the evenings when the team all gathered for dinner. Dawn and the others were keeping Jason apprised of what was going on outside as he hid in his secure fortress.

"The fact that the Builder's forces effectively abandoned the Storm Kingdom as a battlefield weeks ago has lessened the local pandemonium," Dawn said.

"Things are a little more hectic outside the Sea of Storms," Humphrey added. "The Builder's forces staging a complete and immediate withdrawal is causing confusion and havoc

elsewhere. Welcome confusion, but people don't know what's going on or why."

"The Adventure Society is sending out messages as fast as they can open water links, trying to keep some semblance of order."

"Which is agitating the Magic Society," Farrah added.

While Jason had been sleeping off his latest self-destructive escapade, his friends had been out getting the lay of the land after events earlier in the week. Dawn took the royal family, going straight to the top with Soramir. Rufus took the Adventure Society, being the only three-star adventurer in the group. That gave him access to more information than the others could get.

Farrah was a member of the Magic Society, so she took that avenue. She was only an associate member, unlike Clive, who had been a mid-level official. Clive had quite firmly cut his ties with the society, however, despite several attempts on their part to make amends. Farrah was now the best option. Humphrey had gone to the local branch of the Geller family, which was a good way to get a feel for what the influential of Rimaros were up to.

"It's no surprise that you are the object of a great deal of attention right now," Humphrey told Jason. "Not with how they've been watching this place since the light-show you and your familiars put on when we were trying to keep you alive."

"Not to mention the impossible portal you opened that put you in that position," Farrah added. "The Magic Society is *very* interested in hearing more about that."

"Maybe you could visit one city without projecting a huge display of your personal crest over it," Rufus suggested.

"Actually, I've visited two without doing that," Jason said.

"The point is," Humphrey said, "that you've been under close observation ever since. Your encounter with the great astral beings is common knowledge, at least in the circles of people who know things that most don't."

"Meaning rich pricks with an agenda," Jason said.

“You’re a rich prick with an agenda,” Farrah pointed out.

“My agenda is primarily sandwich-related. It doesn’t count.”

“A god showing up for a chat afterwards did not help calm things down,” Rufus added.

“Thus the avalanche of contacts and invitations,” Jason said. “Everyone wants a pound of flesh, whether it’s owed them or not. No surprises there.”

“These initial attempts to reach out are just precursors,” Rufus said. “These groups will all have looked into you by now and have a good idea of how you’ve operated in the past. Right now, they’re testing the waters, hoping to get lucky and have you do something unexpected and rash they can take advantage of.”

“I’ve gotten at least a little better at not doing that,” Jason said grimly. “There were a lot of eyes on me on Earth.”

“You still had a penchant for the big, dramatic move,” Farrah said.

“But I’m past the days of randomly making trouble to see what I can stir up.”

“You stole a nuclear weapon.”

“Not for laughs. Now, when I make trouble, it’s deliberate because I know what I’m trying to stir up.”

“What’s a nuclear weapon?” Humphrey asked.

“A city killer,” Jason said. “It’s the thing Travis made to take down the Builder city.”

“Oh, the super explosion box.”

“That’s what people are calling it?” Jason asked.

“I think we’ve gotten a little off track,” Dawn said.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “What were we talking about? I remember mentioning sandwiches.”

“We were talking about the fact that every powerful organisation in the city, and quite a few beyond, is interested

in what they can get out of you. They're only taking tentative steps right now, but none of them really expect that to get them anything. They're waiting out the aftermath of the Builder's departure, but I can promise you that they're looking for pressure points as we speak. Sooner or later, they're going to come at you hard."

"But politically, right? There's no way they make a hard play with this many eyes on me."

"No," Rufus said. "No one wants to face the wrath of Soramir Rimaros or Dawn here, let alone risk interfering with some agenda of Dominion's they don't know about. They'll be looking for leverage on you, Jason. You're the weak link because no one cares if you get angry, so long as the people around you don't."

"Yeah, I've seen that pattern before," Farrah said. "I imagine they'll have to learn why that's a mistake the hard way."

"The organisations we're talking about aren't fools," Rufus said. "They know that the kind of rewards they're looking for only come from fishing in dangerous waters. They won't push too hard unless they're extremely certain of themselves. Jason, your situation is likely to be annoying, but mostly not dangerous. No one is going to grab you off the street."

"And not every organisation is lacking in decency," Humphrey added.

"I know your family are good people," Jason said. "Unfortunately, there's no shortage of less-good people."

"The best solution is to get out of the Storm Kingdom," Rufus said. "The longer you stay holed up in your pagoda, the worse it's going to get. The Adventure Society was already unhappy about you continuing to hold Melody. Now a lot of very powerful people are looking for answers. Warily, but eagerly."

"They don't care about answers," Jason said. "They care about power. They see the crowd I'm running with and think

I've got something special. They want to know what it is and if they can get in on it or take it for themselves.”

“Yes,” Dawn agreed. “But the forces that have led you to your current position are barely appropriate for you, and arguably aren't at all. They have no place trying to lay claim to any of it.”

“Yeah,” Farrah said. “Because powerful people are famous for deciding that they have enough power and not trying to get more. You can tell them it'll only bring trouble all day long, but it'll only convince them that it's even more valuable than they thought.”

“The question is, what do we do now?” Jason asked. “I'm inclined to wait, at least for the moment. I know that gives pressure time to escalate, but I'm not ready to move yet. Being on the road is a less-secure position than what we have now. What I need is time to heal, and these groups aren't the only ones waiting for things to settle in the Builder's absence. For now, I'd like to let other people make their moves so we can get a sense of what they're after and how hard they're willing to push for it.”

“That's not sustainable,” Rufus said, “but I think it's the right move in the short term. Rather than sticking your neck out, let them do it and see what we can learn.”

“The Adventure Society won't just allow one of their members to be tossed around by powerful people like a ball,” Humphrey said. “They'll want some insight as to what's going on, but give it to them and I think you'll find they shield you from most interested parties.”

“He's right,” Rufus agreed. “That's the covenant: adventurers protect people and the Adventure Society protects adventurers.”

“Yeah, but not every kind of protection is something I'm looking for,” Jason pointed out. “Throwing me in a nice, secure room keeps me safe, and hey, since I'm there, why not ask me some questions?”

“The branch here isn’t like in Greenstone,” Rufus assured him. “Rimaros is one of the most prominent adventuring cities in the world. Nothing they can get from you is worth compromising their reputation.”

“Nothing?” Jason asked.

“Nothing,” Rufus said. “Even if they could get some of the universe power you gave back to the Builder, without the great astral beings going after them, still not worth it.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “That’s the loose plan, then. We wait it out, I heal up—”

“Without finding some new and ridiculously destructive magic to shove inside yourself,” Farrah said pointedly.

“Yes,” Jason said. “Without blowing myself up again. We see what people throw at us and react accordingly.”

“What’s your schedule for departure?” Rufus asked. “Moving too soon might expose you to the machinations of the people watching you, but moving too late gives them too much time to bring their resources to bear.”

“End of the monster surge,” Jason said. “Then we scarper. There will be a lot of adventurers on the move, so we’ll stand out less.”

“Our intention is to stay on the move for a time,” Humphrey told Rufus. “We’ll make our way to Cyrion where the other people from Earth arrived, but we won’t rush it.”

“Lay low, as much as we can,” Jason added. “Assuming an island doesn’t come to life and decide I need to make it some sneakers or whatever weird crap comes at me next.”

“That seems unlikely,” Rufus said. “What are sneakers?”

“A kind of shoe.”

“Why would a sentient island want you to make shoes?”

“I know, right?” Jason asked. “It’s always something.”

Jason made one exception to the policy of not engaging with outside groups and extended an invitation for someone to visit the pagoda. He was waiting for their arrival in a sitting room that, like many of the pagoda's rooms, opened out onto a balcony to take full advantage of the views. That was a design feature that Jason had borrowed from Emir, whose cloud palace usually took the form of five towers with many terraced rooms.

Dawn was keeping him company and they sat side by side in front of a very full table.

"No, you already used the bottom action on your other card," Jason explained. "That means you have to use the top action on this card."

"But I want to use the bottom action."

"Well, you can't."

"Why not?"

"The rules."

"Since when do you care about rules?"

"I care about rules when it matters," Jason said. "This isn't some king or great astral being nonsense that isn't important. This is a board game."

"These rules don't make sense. Why can I only use my axe one time? That's not how axes work."

"You can use it again after you take a long rest."

"How heavy is this axe?"

"It's probably a magic axe. It might need to recharge."

"That is terrible axe design."

"Gary said the same thing," Jason said unhappily.

Dawn shook her head. "You know we still need to talk about the astral throne and astral gate."

"We're in the middle of a game."

"Jason..."

“Not yet. They’re in my soul space. Until I can open the door to it without passing out, I can’t examine them properly. There’s no point discussing it until I can take a better look.”

“That’s what you’re calling your spirit realm now? Soul space?”

“I keep having to explain spirit realms and spirit domains and I always end up answering questions about which one is which, and what’s the difference, can I use them to smuggle amphorae—”

“What?”

“Amphorae. It’s the plural of amphora.”

“I know what amphorae are.”

“Then why did you ask? I’m very confused.”

“You’re dodging the topic. Again.”

“Of course I am. It feels like you’re going to tell me off.”

“I *am* going to tell you off.”

“It’s not my fault I have vast cosmic power. Your boss and her friends keep leaving it lying about. You don’t put a gun out where an irresponsible child could get their hands on it.”

“The irresponsible child being you.”

“Do I at least get points for self-awareness?”

“No.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said, emerging from a shadow. “Priest Quilido will be arriving shortly.”

“Good,” Dawn said gratefully. “Shade, can you please pack up the game?”

“We’re in the middle of a scenario,” Jason complained.

Carlos was nervous about approaching the pagoda that now towered over the cliff. He arrived at the island on the back of a

flying manta, driven by a trained rider. The building stood out from very far off when approaching through the air.

The last time Carlos had spoken to Jason, Carlos had pushed him about participating in the future conflict against the messengers. It was more than he should have done, and Carlos still felt shame as a healer that he had allowed his own agenda to compromise his care for a patient.

Jason had gotten angry over another powerful person attempting to dictate to him. Given what had taken place since they last saw one another, Carlos had a much better idea of what Jason was talking about. Carlos had first met Jason after the Builder attempted to lay claim to Jason's soul. He never imagined that the Builder and the iron-ranker would continue to interact.

The manta flew over the pagoda and Carlos dropped off, the rider turning back in the direction of Livaros. Carlos landed lightly, despite falling from twice the height of the building, and walked up to the entrance. He was met by Jason's shadow familiar.

"Priest Quilido. I know you are here at Mr Asano's invitation, but I hope you can act with a little more decorum than was demonstrated on your last visit. He is, as he was then, recovering from having channelled energies that he should not."

"Again?"

"Yes."

"What happened this time?"

"That is best left for Mr Asano to explain. Follow me, please."

Shade led Carlos through large double doors that opened at their approach, into a large atrium. Multiple mezzanine levels rose into the tower and a waterfall spilled off the lowest one, feeding into a pool. The walls were dark, smoky crystal, but the insides of the crystal swirled with nebulous patterns that were the kaleidoscopic light source for the room.

Plants grew all over, dangling from the mezzanine levels, set into walls and free-standing in pots. They were leafy, tropical varieties with flowers that seemed to shift in colour under the strange light. The pool was in a recessed floor space, surrounded by a garden that had a ringed path and some benches.

“This is very different to the last design,” he observed out loud.

“This design is what Mr Asano uses in his claimed territories,” Shade explained as he led Carlos to the side of the room.

“What does claimed territories mean exactly?”

“What does this place feel like, Priest Quilido?”

“Like a temple to a god that doesn’t exist.”

“That is what I mean by claimed territories. If your god wanted you to know more, you would.”

There were two elevating platforms at the side of the room Shade led Carlos to, under the mezzanines. Between the platforms was a pole that rose through a hole in the ceiling.

“What is the purpose of the pole?” Carlos asked as they moved onto an elevating platform and it started to rise.

“Fighting fires.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I am not responsible for what you do and do not comprehend, Priest Quilido,” Shade said as the elevating platform came to a stop. “This way, please.”

A POWER THAT DID NOT BELONG TO THE WORLD

CARLOS WAS NERVOUS AS HE MOVED THROUGH THE CLOUD pagoda. Jason's familiar was clearly hostile, even as it guided him, and he worried that the entire building would be as well. He could sense its power, dormant for the moment, but he had already had a taste of the power it could call on. That had only been a small, reflexive thing; he had no interest in being on the receiving end of dedicated hostility.

The last time Carlos had seen him, Jason had barely the strength to lift his own head. Even so, he had tapped into the building's power to make it his own, throwing the gold-rank Carlos across the room like a toy. What's more, he did it with raw aura manipulation. While there were essence users whose aura abilities offered telekinetic power, this was not the case for Jason. It wasn't in his power set.

Auras were a spiritual force, an expression of the soul, and using them on others could only be done on a spiritual level. There were exceptions, like most things with magic. An aura power common to the force confluence famously allowed auras to move things physically. Jason was not such an exception, however. None of his powers would let his aura do that.

The power of a silver-ranker to levitate was not unrelated to aura, but it was much more an expression of other aspects of an essence user's inherent power. The fact that gold-rankers could do more than just levitate, along with how and why that was possible, was something mostly hidden from low-rankers. The concepts involved were usually only shared with elite

members of the Adventure Society as they approached gold rank, and members in good standing of the Magic Society when they entered certain fields of study.

This was part of a larger body of restricted knowledge kept secret by the Adventure Society and Magic Society. Other organisations with powerful high-rankers, from churches to governments, all respected this restriction and did not disseminate the information either.

Different knowledge had different levels of restriction, and enforcement varied wildly, depending on the information in question. Inherent changes that high-rankers go through was very loosely held information. While only elites had it formally shared, any gold-ranker could deduce a lot of it from simply having the power in question. Even if they had no formal introduction to the changes they were going through, they experienced them for themselves. Trial and error alone could teach them a lot, and most found the Adventure Society tapping their shoulder, politely instructing them to not go sharing any such discoveries with low-rankers.

Broad knowledge about the soul was also on the lighter end of the restricted information scale. Things like recovery from soul trauma allowing some people to develop unusual strength and abilities with their auras fell under this heading. It was relatively common knowledge, but its spread was discouraged due to the experiments that had been illicitly conducted to explore the concept.

Neither the Adventure Society nor the Magic Society wanted essence users being taken in batches and subjected to soul trauma in order to formalise a process of reliably strengthening auras. More than a few times over the course of their history, both organisations had to step in when someone was doing exactly that. There had been some success with such programs, with unwilling victims eventually developing strength similar to Jason's. For every success, though, there were many more essence users left irrevocably broken.

The reason most of the restricted information was held back was the same: some amoral researcher took the information and hurt many, many people trying to study it.

This was something that Carlos had seen from early in his career, as a healer specialised in soul trauma. His work frequently centred on those victimised by banned research, so it had been necessary to officially induct him into such secrets early.

While some concepts in the restricted information list were relatively common, such as why certain essences were restricted, other information was much more tightly held. Although it was somewhat widely disseminated amongst high-rankers, anyone sharing it with lower-rankers was cracked down on hard. The Adventure Society's restriction enforcement division would be dispatched if the information in question was inappropriately leaked.

This information included details about racial gifts going through a secondary evolution, something both the Adventure Society and Magic Society actively denied was possible. This was because such evolutions were both very rare and disproportionately affected Adventure Society elites. The organisations wanted such individuals protected, as they were ideal candidates for unsavoury research. When a promising member of a prestigious guild or an aristocratic family or a promising self-made adventurer went missing, it stirred up all manner of trouble.

Such information was restricted to gold-rank elites. This meant the most trustworthy members of the two large societies, upper-echelon temple members or high-ranking government officials. In the Adventure Society, for example, many members weren't introduced to various secrets until they reached a two-star rating. Even at gold rank, some members weren't told everything.

Gold rank was the threshold for key information, chosen because it was the only rank where even limited information control became feasible. Reaching gold rank was difficult, and anyone operating outside of the Adventure Society's influence had a much harder time reaching gold rank in the first place. Managing to do so without the society discovering their existence was almost impossible, and such individuals were kept track of as much as possible.

More legitimate gold-rankers, be they adventurers or not, had a lot of freedom from Adventure Society interference with their activities. Their activities were regularly tracked, however, especially those operating on the fringes. Gold-rankers had to be careful about pushing their interests over the lines the Adventure Society was willing to tolerate. While those lines were very broad, the penalties for crossing them were unforgiving.

Gold-rankers looking to conduct illicit research often used silver-rankers as proxies. Even if there wasn't a gold-ranker behind the curtain, silver-rankers were still usually the ones conducting less-than-savoury operations. The combination of relative freedom from Adventure Society attention while still having power and resources made them the porridge that was just right.

The silver-rankers conducting this research were usually completely outside the purview of the Magic Society and Adventure Society. As such, keeping information out of the hands of silver-rankers meant such research was undertaken—and had to be stopped—less often. The information was too widely spread to be truly kept secret, but it at least reduced the problem when most silver-rankers didn't know that such research was possible.

In most cases, it turned out to be a gold-ranker quietly backing the silver conducting the research, and both were heavily penalised when discovered. In most cases, the need to restrict the information they had already proven incapable of appropriately sequestering meant that the answer was execution.

As a healer specialised in dealing with soul trauma, Carlos was one of the few legitimately inducted into such secrets at low rank. His entire career had been helping the victims of people who crossed the lines of decency in their magic research. In all that time, he'd never encountered anyone else like Jason Asano, who managed to encounter one great secret after another, as if they'd been laid out on a path.

From being an outworlder to soul trauma to secondary evolutions, Jason kept stumbling blindly into concepts that

ranged from rarely enforced restrictions to things that were heavily locked down. He knew for a fact that more than one discussion about what to do about it had been held at high levels, but as Jason was surrounded by powerful people who had told him what he should and shouldn't spread around, he was left alone. After all, he had not gone actively seeking out any of the things he had run into, and had often been harmed by them. It was, after all, why Jason and Carlos had met.

Aside from his failings as a healer, since their last encounter, Carlos' mind had been occupied with the latest thing Jason had run headlong into. Being able to exert physical force with the spiritual power of his aura was very far from ordinary, although not unique. Carlos himself had encountered others with an innate power to use their auras in such a way, but they weren't essence users.

"Through here, Priest Quilido," Shade said, standing beside a door that opened on its own.

Having the train of thought broken, Carlos moved through the door. Part of his unease in being in the cloud pagoda was that his gold-rank magical senses, normally so powerful, failed to extend further than he could see. Even across a room, his ability to sense auras and unseen magic grew fuzzy.

The room was a sitting room open to a balcony instead of having a back wall. Two occupied armchairs had their backs to the panoramic ocean view, while the only other object in the room was a third chair, facing them. Jason was in one of the chairs, as expected. The other occupant was unnerving, as they had never met, but Carlos recognised her by description.

The local celestines came in various ethnicities, but none of them combined alabaster skin with ruby eyes and hair. That didn't mean there was no one else matching that description in Rimaros, but even with his senses dimmed, Carlos was completely arrested by the woman whose presence dominated the room.

There was no doubt she was unsheathing her full aura on him, even with his senses heavily dulled. If they weren't, he'd probably have a headache already. If she wandered around like

this the whole time, then the people around her would just bleed out their eyes and die. Normal people, maybe even lower-ranked essence users too. She was revealing her full power here to make a point, and the fact that Jason was sitting next to her, unfazed, reiterated how bizarre he was as well.

Carlos had met his share of diamond-rankers, but even compared to them, the woman in front of him was on a different level. He had been sceptical about some of the things he had heard about her, but now he fully believed them. Hers was a power that did not belong to the world in which he lived.

The things Carlos had heard about Dawn were as intimidating as they were vague. The idea of meeting Soramir Rimaros, founder of one of the most prestigious nations in the world, was a daunting prospect. Hearing of someone roaming around that he was scared of was a terrifying prospect. As for specifics, he had heard little, mostly unreliable information about her relationships with Soramir, the Adventure Society, the royal family and, more recently, Jason.

What should have been the most reliable piece of information he'd been given was also the one he'd had the hardest time believing. Somehow, she had single-handedly eliminated one of the Builder's fortress cities, along with every diamond-rank threat it contained. The details around it were less certain, but one thing he had heard was that her power was so vast that forces of the greater cosmos had decreed she was only allowed to act once; her power was too great to be let roam free in their world. It had seemed utterly absurd when he heard it, but now that he was face to face, it seemed a lot more plausible.

"I think you're scaring him," Jason said with a slight smile. "It might be best if you left Carlos and me alone."

Dawn looked Carlos up and down, her face unreadable. Her aura withdrew and Carlos let out a breath he didn't need or even realise he'd been holding. Her simple presence was enough that he reflexively turned to physiological responses his magical body had left behind decades ago.

Dawn stood and moved next to Jason's chair.

"Still having lunch with Sophie, Belinda and Farrah?" Jason asked her.

"And Taika."

"Taika? I thought it was just going to be the girls."

"He's very gossipy."

"Are any of the rest of you?"

"Belinda said that's why we need him."

"I see," Jason said, clearly lying. "It'll do them some good to relax between contracts. Rimaros is such a nice place, but they can't afford to freely explore because they're caught up in my nonsense. Again. Look out for them, yeah?"

"Of course."

Despite being thrown by the incongruity of going from being washed in Dawn's power to seeing her have an ordinary conversation, Carlos noted her fingers subtly brushing Jason's forearm as she left. She moved to the balcony where flaming wings appeared behind her and she flew off. As Carlos stared at the place she had taken off from, her chair dissolved into the floor and Jason's moved to position him directly opposite the remaining empty seat.

"Do sit down, Carlos."

A GENTLEMAN DOESN'T TELL

CARLOS TURNED HIS ATTENTION TO JASON AS HE SAT OPPOSITE him. He hadn't done more than glance at Jason since coming in, his attention arrested by Dawn. Even with his senses diminished, he could see that Jason was not in a good way. His skin was off-colour and he was still emaciated, as he had been the last time they saw one another. He would have expected more recovery, which meant what he had heard about Jason further injuring himself was true.

Although his condition was poor, Jason's alien eyes were very much alive. Carlos was struck again by how little concern Jason had for rank disparity, the silver-ranker staring at him impassively. His steely expression had only softened while he chatted with Dawn. Their interaction left Carlos with a question that he knew he shouldn't ask, but the gentle intimacy of the gesture he had noticed had startled him.

“Are you and she...?”

“That's a little rude,” Jason said. “But since I still need you to help guide my recovery, I'll put it under the category of doing a medical history.”

Jason had coarse gravel in his voice.

“You are still willing to let me help you, then?”

“Carlos, are you the best soul trauma specialist on the planet?”

“I doubt it.”

“Which isn’t a no. As you’ve no doubt surmised, I’m pretty wrecked right now. And since my body and my soul are the same thing, I need all the help I can get.”

“Jason, you’re a unique case.”

“I get that a lot. I used to think it was cool.”

“I’m saying that while I can do my best, I’m going to be guessing at treatment. And that guess will mostly be ‘rest because anything else might just make it worse.’ I’m not sure how much I can do for you.”

“Can anyone else do better?”

“Possibly.”

“A lot better?”

“Possibly not. Not on this planet, anyway.”

“I’ll be honest, Carlos. My memory of how our encounter ended is a little fuzzy. My understanding is that I lashed out.”

“Yes.”

“I apologise for that. What I won’t apologise for is the anger that led me to that point. What you asked me to do was unbecoming of you as a man, a healer and as a friend.”

Carlos nodded. He had pushed Jason to let him study his recovery with an eye for how to fight those who had bodies like his that were souls made manifest: the physical and spiritual as one. The messengers who had followed the Builder’s lead in invading the world had such bodies and Carlos had pushed Jason to reveal his own weaknesses, in hope they would translate to the messengers as well.

“You’re right,” Carlos said. “I apologise, unreservedly. I have nothing but remorse for my behaviour and I won’t make excuses for it, but you deserve at least an explanation.”

“The explanation is obvious,” Jason said. “You’ve encountered messengers before and you lost people. People who meant a lot to you and it left you feeling helpless. I don’t need to know the specifics; you want a way to hurt the people that hurt you.”

Carlos nodded.

“I won’t begrudge you those feelings,” Jason told him. “While I was away, a gold-ranker killed my brother, my lover and a friend. I know that drive for revenge and the directions it can push you.”

“Did you get your revenge?”

“Not with my own hands. Like you, I recognised that personal action would not get me far and made an oblique approach. I arranged for his demise. My dead girlfriend asked me to let it go and I would have, if he hadn’t come for me again. Or maybe I wouldn’t. I could have let him live, at the end, and I chose to have him die.”

The gravel in Jason’s voice was especially stony as he talked about arranging the death of a man. Carlos was not moved by it, however.

“Then you don’t know what it’s like after all,” he said. “Waiting years. Decades. Longer than you’ve been alive. I won’t be able to find the specific messengers, if they even came back to this world. I wouldn’t recognise them after all these years if they did. My memory at iron rank wasn’t what it is, now that I’m gold.”

“I suppose I don’t know that frustration. But I do know what it is to be helpless to stop people dying at the hands of powers I’ll never be able to challenge. I’ve done my share of staring into the abyss, shouting into the void. The void is still there, same as ever. I’m the one who was changed for it.”

“You’re saying I should let it go.”

“No. I’m saying that I understand taking your chances where you can get them, and what that costs. You feel lesser for what you asked of me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Carlos admitted.

“You’re older than me, Carlos. By quite a bit. But I’ve packed a lot into the last handful of years, and I’ve made a lot of choices I’m not proud of, even though I’d make them again, if it came to it. I’m the lesser for having made them, but I can afford to be. My job is to fix problems, usually by making

them suffer and die. Your job is to make people better. For good or ill, you can't afford to make yourself worse."

Jason sighed.

"I guess I am saying you should let it go. It sucks, but sometimes you just have to find a way to go forward without getting the answers you wanted."

"How is that going for you?" Carlos asked pointedly.

"Real crappily," Jason said with a self-deprecating laugh. "But I think I'm starting to get there."

Carlos spent no small amount of time examining Jason with a plethora of tools he pulled out one after another. Jason patiently endured it, knowing that he couldn't keep doing what he had done to his body without repercussions.

"I'm familiar with authority as a concept," Carlos said while continuing the latest examination. It involved Jason sticking his leg out while Carlos ran a hoop up and down its length, careful to avoid touching the hoop to Jason's skin.

"You've seen it before?"

"No," Carlos said. "I've heard of it. The idea of a mortal harming themselves by using it is completely absurd. Obviously, I should have learned more about every insane thing a person couldn't possibly do to themselves, in anticipation of treating you for doing them all."

Jason chuckled.

"Jason, there's something I'd like to talk about. It's awkward because it's about the messengers, and the last time we discussed them, things went badly."

"Are you going to try and convince me to subject myself to experiments on how best to kill me again?"

"No. I hope I never lose sight of myself that badly again."

"Then just tell me."

Carlos nodded and finished up his examination. He put the testing device back into a dimensional bag and returned to his chair.

“You said your memory of our altercation was hazy,” Carlos said.

“Yep,” Jason said. “I have a vague memory of getting angry and tapping into the cloud house. After that it all gets fuzzy.”

“You threw me across the room.”

“Sorry about that. You weren’t hurt, were you? I don’t think I activated any of the building’s true defences.”

“I was unharmed, but what happened to me isn’t what matters. How you did it is.”

“I was pretty wrecked. I’m assuming I drew on the strength of the house. It is what I was trying to do.”

“My concern is what you did with that strength. When you threw me, you used your aura, and your aura alone.”

“My aura power can’t do that.”

“I know,” Carlos agreed.

Jason sat in silence for a moment, absently tapping a finger to his lips, his expression contemplative.

“This is about my soul existing physically, isn’t it? You said this was related to the messengers, and they’re physical-spiritual gestalts, like me. They can do what I did?”

“Yes,” Carlos said. “They can use their auras to manipulate the physical world. It seems that you can do the same, but the question is whether you can do it on your own or if you need the support of whatever your cloud house does for you.”

“Should I try it out?”

“Definitely not,” Carlos said. “Until you are fully recovered, let’s leave experimenting with unknown powers off the shelf. But I would like to learn about your cloud house. As you might imagine, your tests all came back extremely

anomalous. I need all the information I can get to best help along your recovery.”

“The cloud house is off limits,” Jason said. “Some secrets I have to keep. I think that maybe your gods can help you with the right approach, so... pray on it? I’m not sure how that really works. Gods normally come to me for a chat, so I’m not super familiar with... Carlos, are you okay?”

Carlos closed his mouth after his jaw was left hanging open.

“Mate, it looked like your eyes were going to open so wide, your skin would peel back off your skull. What’s the matter?”

“Gods normally come to you?”

“Not always. I went to Knowledge’s temple once. That was the day I learned that gods are real. She was a little miffed that I saw one in the worship square and she wasn’t my first.”

Carlos ran his hands over his face.

“Jason, you are, without even the most remote of competition, the single most complicated patient I’ve ever had. And I’ve spent decades dealing with people who’ve had their souls hammered like iron in a smithy. I’ll see if my god has any insight on how to approach your treatment, but I’d like to know everything you’re willing to tell me about the various forces you’ve channelled through your body. The tests I performed suggested that you underwent something that served to help you recover before something else made you worse. I’m assuming the authority you used was what harmed you again, but I’m curious about the recovery.”

“I try be a gentleman about these things,” Jason said, “but since it’s medical-related, I suppose I can tell you. You know how high-rankers aren’t usually intimate in the old-fashioned way?”

“I’m familiar,” Carlos said. “There’s little point fulfilling physical urges that you’ve moved past. Gold-rankers don’t feel the need for ordinary physical intimacy. I imagine you are

much the same, with your outworlder body accelerating the transition to being fully magical.”

“Oh, I’m well past that stage. So, Dawn showed me something that high-rankers do with their auras.”

“And you could do it?”

“Yeah, it was... well, that aspect isn’t medically relevant. But yes.”

“That’s not something people can normally do before gold rank, but at this point, it’s going to take more than that to surprise me.”

Jason opened his mouth to respond, but Carlos forestalled him with a raised hand.

“That wasn’t a challenge, Jason.”

Jason’s shoulders slumped.

“Fine.”

“I’m familiar with the energy exchange process, being a gold-ranker myself. What I need to know is how it impacted your recovery so I can incorporate it into establishing a treatment program. Anything you can tell me would help.”

“No worries. You know, I never found out what they call it here. On my world, it’s sometimes referred to as dual cultivation, although there are some very sketchy ideas around that...”

For the remaining duration of the monster surge, Carlos started with daily visits as he worked out the most effective treatment rituals and alchemical supplements to accelerate Jason’s recovery. As they narrowed down the most effective solutions, his visits gradually decreased, leaving Carlos time for other pursuits.

Aside from Jason, his major project was examining the prisoners taken when the Order of Redeeming Light’s secret

base had been discovered and raided. He was studying the effects of the ritual of purification they had gone through and if it could be undone. His revelation that the order was not what it seemed, and neither was the god behind it, had opened a huge can of worms that he had thankfully passed on to larger authorities to deal with.

Once the truth was out, the deity Disguise gave up the pretence of being Purity, throwing an already chaotic world into yet more chaos. While the Ecumenical Council of churches, the Adventure Society and governments across the world were exploring the ramifications of Purity not being Purity, Carlos was attempting to undo what the purification ritual had done.

“It wasn’t a purification at all,” Carlos explained to Jason as he lay in a ritual circle within his cloud pagoda. “Rather than cleaning things out of people, it was introducing some kind of foreign element.”

Above Jason was a complex array of magical light, constantly shifting as glowing tendrils reached down to touch Jason’s body. They had been discussing the topic during Jason’s treatments for weeks.

“Are you sure you should be telling me this stuff? I’m pretty sure they don’t let one-star adventurers get briefed on the important stuff.”

“Where’s Dawn today?”

“She’s talking with Soramir about... oh, I see what you did there.”

“Jason, three-star adventurers are meant to go on the most politically sensitive missions. Given that any three-star mission right now has a good chance of starting with ‘find out what Jason Asano is up to,’ is there any point in giving you a star rating? I’ve been talking to a lot of the Adventure Society high-ups. I’m pretty sure that, given the choice, they’d replace the stars on your Adventure Society badge by engraving the words ‘Asano, you bastard.’”

“That’s a little hurtful. What did I do?”

“You caused a lot of powerful people to have even more powerful people leaning over them. They hate that.”

“So, they just decided I can know whatever?”

“No one actually said it, but you could probably just ask Soramir Rimaros or Princess Liara or Dawn the magic space princess.”

“Magic space princess?”

“That’s what your friend Travis called her, and it seemed about right. Nothing makes sense around you; do you realise this?”

“Everything makes sense around me. I’m a very sensible man.”

“Sure. But yes: no one will come down on us for me telling you about the prisoners and the purification ritual.”

“You explained that before, right?” Jason asked. “You said it was some kind of modified vampire curse.”

“I did. I wasn’t sure how much of that conversation you remembered.”

“The early bits clearly enough. As I recall, the question was whether you could remove the taint without killing the people who have it.”

“Exactly,” Carlos said. “Once the curse of a lesser vampire reaches a completed state, it can no longer be cleansed by ordinary means, even with a cleansing power as strong as yours. All attempts to do so have been fatal for the subject, which is something my church has wanted to overcome for a very long time.”

“Sophie’s mother,” Jason said, worry in his voice.

“You still have her locked up?”

“I’m not giving her to the Adventure Society. She won’t tell them anything they want as is, and I won’t let them risk killing her trying to strip out whatever is in her.”

“Is she still adhering to the idea that Purity is her god?”

“Yes. The prisoners are still doing the same?”

“Yes, there’s something about what was done to them that makes them ignore facts that contradict their beliefs, however obvious.”

“We have a lot of that in my world too. We call it faith as well, funnily enough.”

“Jason, to some of us, our religion is very important. So, perhaps you could avoid being a huge prick about it?”

“Sorry. Your boss does seem like a decent guy.”

“I’m optimistic that my current research will reveal a way to remove this taint from these people. There might be some hope for Miss Wexler’s mother. My hope is that, if I’m successful, it might lead to a method for undoing vampire curses and similar transformations.”

“That would be amazing. What kind of timeline are we looking at?”

“I have no idea. Long. This will probably be my life’s work, and the life’s work of many other healer priests. My advice would be to keep a tight hold on Miss Wexler’s mother until I have a reliable way to treat her, whatever the Adventure Society and Callum Morse may want.”

“He hasn’t been talking to you, has he?”

“Jason, I’m the only person not in your tight circle who regularly goes in and out of this pagoda. Everyone has been talking to me.”

“Oh. Sorry about that.”

“No need to apologise. For all the ridiculous things you involve yourself in that make my life harder, I fully respect that each one represents dangerous sacrifice that you risked your life to make. Well, except the ones where you were making time with—”

“That’s enough of that,” Jason chided. “A gentleman doesn’t tell, and his doctor shouldn’t either.”

RECALIBRATE THEIR EXPECTATIONS

“I WANT TO TRY OPENING UP SOME PORTALS,” JASON SAID AS Carlos was about to leave after his latest treatment session. They stood in the vast atrium, by the large double doors that served as the main entrance.

“I would strongly advise against it,” Carlos told him. “You are largely recovered, but if you push too hard, you could backslide. Keep doing the mana circulation exercises and use your non-dimensional powers. Anything that touches the astral will likely exacerbate the remaining damage and complicate your recovery.”

“But all my non-dimensional powers are very murder-y. Are you telling me to go kill someone?”

“You know that I’m not. Look, use your shadow hands and learn how to juggle or something.”

“Juggle? You want me to ride a unicycle next?”

“I don’t know what that is, but so long as it doesn’t involve dimensional forces, go for it.”

Carlos chuckled at Jason’s aghast expression, opened one of the double doors and left. Outside, a beautiful woman with blue hair approached across the lawn.

“Princess Liara,” Carlos greeted as they moved past one another.

“Priest Quilido.”

Inside, Jason looked at Liara, who stopped just outside the threshold of the pagoda’s doorway.

“Is this an official visit?” Jason asked.

“Yes.”

“How is your husband?”

“Well, thanks to you. He wanted me to convey his gratitude.”

“I have no interest in an official visit. A social one, on the other hand, is very different. Let your husband convey his gratitude in person.”

The door closed itself between them.

Princess Liara and her husband, Baseph, were travelling from Livaros to Arnote in a flying carriage. Theirs was a political marriage, but after several decades and three children, there was a hard-to-match intimacy between them. They had been friends and occasional lovers across the years, but had been growing closer recently.

Liara had spent most of her career hunting down those who violated the Adventure Society’s list of restricted activities. In the course of doing so, she had met Carlos a number of times, as his job was to help the victims of those Liara and her team had hunted down. Knowing him was why she had followed Jason’s suggestion to bring Carlos in to work with the Order of Redeeming Light prisoners.

When she had been reassigned to the Builder response unit in Rimaros, several years earlier, Liara settled into her home for a longer stretch than she had since her children were young. More time with her husband, this time without a trio of little prince and princesses underfoot, had brought them close.

Their latest time together had come to an end when Baseph agreed to take on the role of administrator of an underwater mining complex. This proved a harrowing choice, as it was raided by religious fanatics; Baseph and no small number of his staff had to be extracted by unconventional means.

Jason Asano had done exactly that, at significant cost to himself. The spectacular light and aura show that came directly after was the by-product of efforts to keep him alive in the aftermath. Carlos refused to discuss his patient, but the fact that he was regularly visiting Asano spoke volumes as to how profoundly damaged Jason had been.

Because of how her husband was rescued, Liara knew she owed Jason no small amount of debt. This was complicated by her relationship with Asano, which was a strange one, by her standards. Given who Jason was famously spending time with, it was probably quite ordinary from his perspective.

Now, Liara was tasked with being the royal family's liaison with Asano again. Following the evacuation of the underwater complex, bizarre events had been surrounding Asano. His strange, changing building had become a fortress and, after much analysis, it was decided that imposing external will on Asano was a bad idea. His building, now a pagoda, was strongly suspected to have strange and powerful protections.

That analysis was partly based on Liara's own experiences. She had been inside the cloud house and felt its power, dormant but deep, like a lake with a monster sleeping at the bottom. But the defences were not the reason she had argued strongly against going in to take Asano.

Liara owed Asano and did not take that debt lightly. He and his team had been critical in the underwater complex rescue, rescuing her husband and even revealing the Order of Redeeming Light's location. They had taken risks and Jason had almost killed himself; the idea of repaying that with what could, at best, be considered heavy-handedness was something she was staunchly against.

That was without even considering the forces Jason was involved with, including the god Dominion, who had stopped by for what observer reports referred to as a 'casual chat.' Even ignoring that, Liara knew what came of trying to push Jason Asano underfoot. She had very thoroughly gone through his Adventure Society file, the restricted parts included.

For his entire career, and even before, Jason had been dealing with powerful and dangerous people. Time and again, while Asano often paid a price, it was the other side that ended up losing. From blood cultists to crime lords to a Magic Society director to great astral beings, looking down on Jason Asano because of his rank was a demonstrably bad idea.

Even though she understood why, Liara did not appreciate being the one assigned to handle him for the royal family. It meant that she was forced to meet him with an agenda rather than the gratitude that should be the only thing she brought to his door.

“I don’t like this,” she said, sitting in the carriage next to her husband.

Sitting opposite them were their three children, all silver rank like their father. Dara was the eldest and, like the middle child, Zareen, had followed their mother into adventuring. The youngest was the only son, Joseph, who was an administrative official with the Amouz family business interests, like his father.

“It’s fine,” Baseph said, giving Liara’s hand a comforting squeeze.

“I don’t like that he asked me to bring you before he’d talk to me,” Liara said. “It’s like he wants a hostage.”

“Of course he does,” Zareen said. “It’s a power play, and one he’s smart to make. He’s been silver rank for less time than I have and look at what he’s caught up in. The people looking at him now are used to just taking what they want from silver-rankers. He needs to recalibrate their expectations so that they approach him from a position of negotiation instead of making demands. I bet there have already been discussions about going into that building of his and dragging him out.”

Zareen was the physically smaller of the two daughters, not inheriting her mother’s height, but she did have the iconic sapphire hair and eyes of the royal family. She was much more interested in politics than her mother and had been close to the politically savvy Vesper, prior to her death. It had earned

Zareen her three-star rating with the Adventure Society, as someone who could take on the most delicate of missions.

“I hate this,” Liara complained. “I’m a hunter, not a politician.”

“If you don’t want to go probing this guy for information, then don’t,” Dara said. “Tell the family you won’t do what they want.”

Dara was a one-star adventurer, and happy to be so. It meant she only qualified for simple monster-hunting missions, which was exactly how she liked it. Even less interested in politics than her mother, she had Liara’s height but Baseph’s dark copper hair and eyes. She was muscular and a highly capable frontline combatant, compared to her tricky sister and stealthy mother.

“Sure, Dara,” Zareen said. “She should go to the king and his ancestral majesty Soramir and tell them that she doesn’t want to do that.”

“I would.”

“We know,” Zareen said.

“Refusing to do what the family wants would only mean they send someone who doesn’t know Asano,” Liara said. “The man we’re going to see has had people like me hovering over him since he became an adventurer. I’ve read his file and seen how that turns out when people like me push him. It’s not a good idea.”

“It seems to be working out for him,” Dara said.

“This is what you think working out looks like?” Zareen asked. “He’s a turtle in his shell, hiding from the many forces that want a slice of him.”

“Yeah, but he’s on the big stage, isn’t he? We’re princesses, and only the protocol servants know who we are.”

“We’re fairly borderline as princesses go, Dara. And having to hide isn’t the only thing this guy has had to deal with.”

“No, it isn’t,” Liara said. “I don’t want any of you to go through what he has, which is why...”

She turned a glare on her husband.

“...I was against any of you coming along and getting involved in this.”

“We want to meet the man who saved our father,” Joseph said.

“I want to meet the man who spent the last two months sitting around in his house, telling the most powerful people in the city to bog off,” Dana said. “I want to be like that.”

“That’s not how I would describe it,” Liara said. “And I don’t want you to share Asano’s experiences. If Carlos Quilido takes months to heal something, that’s something you very much want to avoid happening to you.”

“I’m more interested in the man himself,” Zareen said. “Is it true that his aura is as strong as a gold-ranker’s?”

“Yes,” Baseph said. “It’s a little unsettling, if I’m being honest. I felt it being projected out of that house of his, the day of the rescue.”

“Everyone on the island did,” Liara said. “I felt it from Livaros.”

“It’s very domineering,” Baseph said. “I can see why Dominion likes him.”

“The royal family was looking at marrying him in, wasn’t it?” Zareen asked.

“No,” Liara scolded, jabbing a finger at Zareen. “Don’t even think about it.”

“My quiet little town has been a lot less quiet since you arrived,” Pelli told Jason as they sat on a balcony of his pagoda, sharing a pitcher of tropical juice and more magic-infused alcohol than was strictly appropriate for late morning.

She was the mayor of Palisaros, the once sleepy little beach town on a lagoon where Jason had settled. She was a member of the royal family but also separate from them, although Jason was unaware of the circumstances.

Jason was being visited by Pelli and Estella Warnock. The trio had struck up something of a friendship when working together to defend Arnote from loose monsters during the Builder's attack on Rimaros. With the adventurers busy going to war, the three had needed to step in, since the monster surge didn't care what people were doing and just kept producing monsters.

Contrary to what Carlos may have thought, it was that pair and not he who were Jason's most frequent visitors over the course of his convalescence. Estella Warnock had moved into her grandfather's house, not far from Jason's, and was beholden to no organisations. With Pelli acting as a shield for her, she had managed to remain that way, even with people now paying her close attention as she went in and out of the pagoda.

"I'm genuinely sorry about what's happened here," Jason told Pelli. "I was looking for a nice, quiet time. I always suspected things might get a little boisterous for me, but I never expected it to be this much or this fast."

"It has been good for local business," Pelli acknowledged. "All the rental homes have been booked out by people here to watch you for one organisation or another. Two new cafés have opened."

"And are you the one watching me for the royals?"

"I took myself away from all that nonsense for a reason," Pelli said. "I don't want to end up with some upstart rescuing my husband only to turn around and threaten him."

"I'm not threatening anyone's husband—which you don't have, by the way. I'm just using Liara to set a tone for future interactions. I need to show that I won't be dictated to."

"You know that the smart move would be to let them dictate away and then just ignore them. Less confrontational."

“I’ve never been one for the smart move. I don’t think I like what that says about me.”

Pelli chuckled, then looked out over the balcony.

“I’m pretty sure that’s their carriage I can sense heading this way, so I’ll trot off.”

She stood up and Estella did the same.

“I’ll go too,” Estella said, then claimed the pitcher from the small table that held the drinks. “I’m also taking this.”

“No worries,” Jason said with a chuckle.

Jason got to his feet as Pelli nimbly vaulted the railing, not bothering to leave by the door.

“Asano, I have been contacted by people,” Estella said. “Pelli has been shielding me from strangers, but this is someone I know.”

“And?”

“We should talk about it. But I told them I wouldn’t do anything until you were recovered, so I’ll tell you about it then.”

“Sounds good.”

DEEDS OF LEGEND

LIARA'S FAMILY SAT AROUND A DINING TABLE FILLED WITH food in Jason's cloud house. Liara glowered as Baseph held her hand under the table, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

"...little did I know that your mother had leaked information about my route to use me as bait to try and catch some Builder cultists," Jason said, continuing his story.

"She didn't!" Zareen said with a laugh.

"Oh, she did. Except it wasn't Builder cultists that ambushed me, but Purity fanatics."

"Why were Purity fanatics after you?"

"Well, ostensibly, they were doing it as part of a deal with the Builder. I have a few tricks up my sleeve for dealing with the Builder's own goons, so he gave the Order of Redeeming Light a—"

Liara coughed pointedly.

"...*undisclosed asset*, in return for going after me," Jason finished. "They were just doing it as part of a deal with the Builder. It's all very complicated."

"You realise," Liara said to Jason, "that all of this is, strictly speaking, restricted information."

"Send me a fine or something," Jason said. "Anyway, they weren't going to kill me—at least, not yet. As it turned out, a friend of mine is the long-lost daughter of the leader of this order of Purity fanatics—the local branch, at least—and they

want to use me as bait to get their hands on her, before dealing with me for the Builder.”

“You’re kidding,” Zareen said.

“It’s all true,” Jason said. “Anyone making all this up would be a real hack. So, I get jumped by these Purity nutbags, and the Builder had clearly been talking out of school about my powers because they were prepared to counter my abilities.”

“That was when Mother stepped in to save you?” Joseph asked.

“Oh, you’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Jason asked.

“You fought them off, then?” Dara asked. “How many were there?”

“I gave it a go, but no,” Jason said. “There were three of them and I copped a drubbing. They chased me through the jungle until they finally pinned me down. Now, I’d already realised that your mother, or someone working for her, was probably watching. I knew she viewed me as expendable and these people had been a little too well-prepared. I couldn’t be certain she was actually there, though, so I fought until I didn’t have any other options. So, there I am, on my knees in the jungle, covered in mud. The only option I’ve got left is to point out your mother, who I was *relatively* confident was nearby.”

“Why hadn’t you shown yourself already?” Joseph asked Liara.

“Yes, Princess,” Jason asked, his tone a gleeful twist of the knife. “Why hadn’t you?”

“She wanted to see how well he could fight,” Dara guessed. “If you are going to have an ally, you should understand their capabilities and limitations.”

“No,” Zareen said. “I bet Mother wanted Mr Asano captured, so she could follow the Purity adherents back to the others. Which Mr Asano realised and deliberately ruined by revealing her presence because he was not interested in the being captured plan. Even if Mother hadn’t revealed herself at

that point, or he had been wrong and she wasn't there, it would make them a lot more cautious about returning to wherever they were based. That would give Mr Asano more chances to escape captivity."

"I told you to call me Jason."

Jason continued to amuse the siblings with anecdotes as Liara looked on with disapproval and Baseph with amusement. As Shade was clearing away the plates from the dessert course, Jason looked down at the floor, then turned to Baseph.

"It looks like my team is arriving home from a mission," he said.

Baseph was an experienced spouse to a politically important person and did not miss the signal.

"Great, I'll be able to thank them again. Come along, kids."

"Dad, I'm thirty-seven," Dara said.

"Of course you are, sweetie."

Shade led them away, leaving Liara and Jason alone. Jason got up and cloud stuff emerged from a wall before solidifying into a wooden drinks cabinet. He opened it and started mixing cocktails.

"You have a lovely family," he said as he worked. His voice was sincere, without the tinge of amusement that usually underpinned his tone.

"Did you have to bring them into this?"

"I would have preferred a purely social engagement, it's true. But that isn't an option for either of us, is it, Princess?"

"No," Liara said. "No, it isn't."

Jason moved back to the table, setting one glass down in front of Liara and sipping at another as he sat back down. "Did they tell you to try getting something specific out of me, or just whatever you could?"

"They want you to come in to the Adventure Society for a debrief."

“I bet they do.”

“You know that you can’t hide in here forever.”

“I know. But I’m sure you’ve noticed that my life can get very complicated, very fast. Until I’m fully recovered, I have no interest in exposing myself to the next unexpected event or person making decisions for me for the greater good.”

“Which I’m happy to go back and tell them. Honestly, you should get out of the Storm Kingdom. You’ve generated a lot of goodwill here, but there are a lot of people who see you as an asset more than a person.”

Jason chuckled.

“I’ve become quite accustomed to local authorities taking that particular stance. You know, if some of your fellow gold-rankers do decide to offer me a firm invitation in person, don’t discourage them too hard. It’s been a while since gold-rankers showed up looking for trouble and I’ve made a few upgrades since then. I’d be interested in seeing how it works out.”

“I can never tell if you’re being serious.”

“It’s a funny thing. I never used to be serious and now I always am, yet I’ve been the same level of ridiculous the whole time. When your life is outrageous, you have to be outrageous to live it.”

Jason frowned.

“I’m starting to sound like a book about finding yourself in Tuscany. I may be about to meet a nice man. Also, I think vampires may have ruined Tuscany.”

Liara shook her head.

“You’re not getting any easier to deal with, Jason.”

He chuckled.

“What do you need to go back to your people with a win, Liara?”

“You could hand over Melody Jain.”

“Not happening.”

“No one knows what you’ve got going on, Jason, and holding that woman is a signal that you’re operating on some agenda of your own.”

“Everyone is operating on some agenda of their own, Princess.”

“Not everyone has as much impact when they do, Mr Asano. The last thing we need is another interdimensional threat while you’re holding meetings with great astral beings.”

“That’s fair,” Jason conceded.

“I’ve already gotten quite a lot out of you. I know those tidbits you were dropping as you entertained my children were not in there by accident.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jason said innocently. “If you managed to glean something from my sparkling lunch conversation, that’s down to your political prowess.”

“We didn’t know that they wanted to keep you alive because of Sophie Wexler.”

“Her mother shared that little nugget.”

“You’ve got her talking?”

“Her daughter has. Not what you’d call an interrogation, but we’ve managed to pick up a thing or two.”

“I would love to listen in on those conversations.”

“Shade,” Jason said.

Jason still wasn’t using his own dimensional abilities, so he’d been using Shade’s dimensional storage as an ancient wallet from beyond reality. He took out a folder and pushed it across the table to Liara.

“You’ll have to settle for transcripts,” Jason said. Liara moved to open the folder and Jason put his hand on it to stop her. “Social event, Princess. You can take your peek once you’re on the way home.”

Liara gave Jason a flat look but placed the folder in a dimensional pouch at her waist.

“You know this won’t be enough,” Liara said. “You rattled a lot of windows when you had gods and great astral beings coming by to chat on your lawn.”

“Okay, a few points. One, there was only one god, and he wasn’t invited. You know what gods are like.”

“No, Jason. I do not know what gods are like.”

“And besides, the result of that meeting was the Builder going away. What do I have to do to get people on my side?”

“What were you expecting? You made the Builder leave. What kind of silver-ranker can do that?”

“You know that there’s context to these events.”

“Yeah, because that’s how legends go. Deep dives into historical context.”

“I think legend is a stretch.”

“No, Jason; it isn’t. Some guy told the Builder to go away and he did. People will be telling that story for a long time, and they won’t be going into the contextual nuances. It’ll just get grander in the telling.”

Jason let out a tired, wincing laugh. “You know, that’s exactly what I imagined when I became an adventurer. Deeds of legend.”

“And now?”

“They’re a lot more fun from far away.” Jason drained his glass. “The powers that be are looking for some assurance that I’m not some herald of the next big threat, yes?”

“There are also the ones who want to know how you got into this position so they can exploit it for themselves, but we try not to let them talk too much at meetings.”

Jason laughed.

“What does Soramir say? He’s going to set the tone.”

“Yes, he is.”

“And?”

“He says that someday, you’re going to be diamond rank, and you’ll remember how you were treated at silver.”

“I thought diamond-rankers were meant to be above petty vengeance over the past.”

“They are,” Liara said. “Because they get all their petty vengeance out of the way early.”

She smiled as Jason laughed again.

“You seem less weighed-down,” she told him. “You were quite intense when you first came to Rimaros. Like an alchemical bomb that could go off if it was shaken too hard.”

“I went through a lot in the other world, and I didn’t have my team with me. Now, most of my affairs are settled and what I want more than anything else is to spend some time being as ordinary an adventurer as I can manage. With my friends. Which, right now, means getting away from Rimaros.”

“I’m not sure that ordinary is ever going to be a path you get to walk, Jason.”

“Yeah, well, if anyone in your circle has any ideas to make that easier, let me know. Seriously. I think everyone would be happier if I stood out less.”

“I’ll put it to the Adventure Society.”

“Thank you, I apprecia...”

“What is it?” Liara asked after Jason trailed off.

“It seems that your eldest has taken a liking to my boy Humphrey.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah,” Jason said as he stood up. “His girlfriend doesn’t have a lot of approaches to conflict resolution, so we should probably get down there.”

“You can see what’s going on anywhere in the building?” Liara asked, also getting to her feet.

“Nothing is hidden from me in this place. Come on; we can use the fireman’s pole.”

“The what?”

Dara rubbed the side of her head.

“I’d have had her if she’d stop moving for one damn second.”

“I imagine that’s why she didn’t, sweetie,” Baseph told her. “Now, get in the carriage.”

He led her out through the double doors. Gathered in the atrium was Jason and his team, minus Humphrey and Sophie, along with Liara and her other two children.

“It was lovely to meet you,” Jason told Zareen and Joseph. “And while I’m very flattered, I’m not looking for the entanglements a political marriage would bring.”

“Mother, what did you tell him?” Zareen asked.

“Oh, you need to watch what you say in this building,” Belinda said. “Jason sees and hears everything. I’m still convinced he watches Humphrey and Sophie—”

“Lindy!” Clive admonished.

“What?” Belinda asked. “You think he does too.”

“Yes, but we don’t discuss that kind of thing in front of company.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Would you two please stop?” Jason asked them. “You’re making me look bad in front of the royalty.”

“Since when do you care?” Neil asked. “I remember you saying that royalty were all a bunch of—”

“So lovely of you to come by, Liara,” Jason said. “Please give my best to the king or whoever.”

Jason stepped out on the balcony from his bedroom, stretching his arms in the morning sun. Shade emerged from a shadow to stand beside him.

“I’m sure I’m fully recovered,” he said. “I feel fine. Better than fine. You know I always come out of these scrapes stronger than when I went in.”

“You promised Priest Quilido that you would not start using your dimensional abilities until he conducted final tests,” Shade said.

“I thought you didn’t like him.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. And even if that were the case, it has no relation to his abilities as a physician.”

“Fine. When is he coming by?”

“He sent his regrets, as his research has delayed him. He will be along in the evening, rather than the afternoon.”

Jason groaned.

“There are other ways to occupy your time, Mr Asano. Princess Zara Rimaros has invited you to visit the memorial put up for Miss Vesper.”

“They were close, weren’t they? Vesper was Zara’s escort to Greenstone.”

“Then shall I respond positively?”

“No, it smells like a trap.”

“I don’t think she would do that, Mr Asano, although perhaps others might seize the opportunity. I shall extend your regrets.”

“Thank you. Anything else?”

“The Adventure Society seems to have taken Princess Liara’s visit as a positive sign and asked for you to meet a representative.”

“Liara is an Adventure Society official. A high-ranking one, at that. Who are they sending in my direction?”

“Rickard Geller.”

“They’re sending Rick? I thought he went back north.”

“It would seem not.”

“I know he wanted to; he feels over his head. The protocol officer at the palace got his name wrong. In front of the king. He’s not even an Adventure Society official, is he? I thought he was just an adventurer.”

“I imagine they wanted to send a friendly face, but you can ask him in person. I assume you will permit his visit.”

“I’m certainly not going to turn him away.”

“Miss Warnock asked me to set aside some time so she could speak to you.”

“She mentioned there was something she wanted to discuss. Go ahead and find a free moment.”

“Very good, Mr Asano. There are quite a number of other social overtures, but nothing that warrants your attention. I will point out that Callum Morse has been making daily requests to talk to you for some time. He briefly started approaching your team members when they were on the job, but Mrs Remore put a stop to that.”

“What about others? I know the team isn’t telling me everything because they don’t want me to feel bad, but they’re getting pressured when they’re out and about, aren’t they?”

“Young Master Geller has made it quite clear that it is nothing they cannot handle.”

“And you’ll listen to him over me?”

“Of the two of you, Mr Asano, whose judgement would you trust?”

Jason gave Shade a long look.

“Yeah, fair enough.”

A KING NEEDS A THRONE

RUFUS HAD INSTILLED IN JASON AN APPRECIATION FOR THE fundamentals of training. Since those first days in Greenstone, Jason's life had been storms of activity, followed by downtime for various reasons. Whether it was waiting for the Reaper trials to begin or staying with family in a world that ostensibly lacked magic and monsters, there were periods when Jason was not constantly caught up in the fight.

It was during those times that Jason turned back to the training fundamentals in earnest. While he was in recovery, Jason's body recovered faster than his ability to use his magical abilities well, so he took that time again. He started with meditation, as even with a ravaged body, it was something he could easily do. It even seemed to accelerate his recovery a little, to the point that Carlos noticed the difference and strongly encouraged him to continue.

As his physical state started to improve, Jason turned back to Rufus for guidance once more. With the monster surge winding down, Rufus had moved away from taking contracts in rapid succession and started working with Jason again. The focus of their training had been one of Jason's critical gains during his time away, outside of the growth in power that came from his rank and his essence abilities. It was something that came from the foundations that Rufus had laid with Jason's original training and the harrowing experiences Jason had on Earth.

Isolated in a transformation zone, fighting what felt like ceaseless battles, Jason had entered a state known as a combat

trance. It was something he had managed to re-enter sporadically since, where all his capabilities were maximised to the limits of his powers and skills. On the flattened roof of the pagoda, Rufus and Jason stood facing one another as Rufus instructed Jason.

“The combat trance is a difficult state to enter. It is two oppositional states of mind, melded into one. It is simultaneously the empty-mind state of meditation, along with the conscious-mind state that can think tactically and strategically.”

Jason nodded.

“I’ve felt that contradiction,” he said. “It’s why I still struggle to enter that state.”

“But you have done it, on far more than one occasion.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about those times,” Rufus said. “What do they have in common?”

“It was always intense situations where I was vastly outnumbered and pushed to the limits. Sometimes I chose the circumstances because I knew it would push my limits. Sometimes the circumstances chose me.”

Rufus nodded.

“What you’re describing is very typical. The meditation techniques I taught you, especially the Dance of the Sword Fairy, are designed to prime you for this. But that is only the preparation, and the important part is what comes next. You have to do the work. You have to drive yourself. Only once you have pushed yourself to the limits of your potential can you take that extra step.”

“And that’s where the pressure comes in.”

“Yes. You have to reach a position where you don’t have any more to give, then be in a position where you need to give more anyway. Where the only way forward is for your mind to strip away everything you don’t need and become completely

focused on what you do. To unconsciously act in a conscious manner. Instinctual deliberation.”

“We have this concept in my world,” Jason said. “We call it effortless action, and it’s famously difficult to accomplish. I can only think of one person who had truly accomplished it, and he’s a legendary figure, rather than a historical one. I’m told that it’s almost impossible until your body has started moving away from the brain as the centre of the mind, which is bronze rank at least.”

“That’s the generally accepted wisdom,” Rufus said.

“When did you first achieve a combat trance?”

“When I was eighteen.”

“Didn’t you get essences when you were nineteen?”

“I don’t want to talk about that. Tell me about this legendary figure of yours.”

“No worries. There’s a place called the Hundred Acre Wood...”

The sky was painted in gorgeous sunset colours as Carlos entered the pagoda and he paused, narrowing his eyes.

“It feels different here today. Calmer.”

“Mr Asano has spent much of the day in meditation,” Shade said, guiding Carlos across the atrium. “He has been achieving better results as he recovers.”

“His mood affects the whole building? It’s genuinely an extension of his soul, isn’t it? And does his soul being a physical manifestation increase the effect?”

“I do hope that you are just curious and not gathering information, Priest Quilido. You have more insight than most into what Mr Asano’s soul is capable of, which means you could prove a danger to him. Also, that you understand the danger he could be to you.”

“I’m not a threat to him, Shade. I’m an ally.”

“You would not be the first ally to come for him, Priest Quilido. They always thought that being higher rank was enough too.”

“You’re very protective of him,” Carlos said as their platform ascended. “Added to his propensity for coming back from the dead, has Jason found the favour of the Reaper?”

“Mr Asano courts no favour. He is true to himself, for good or—more often than I would like—ill.”

The platform carried them all the way to the roof, which had been flattened out compared to the day before. Jason was standing at the edge, looking out not at the sea but inland, over the island. He wasn’t wearing his normal outfits of either smartly tailored tropical-weather suits or garish floral shirts and shorts. He was in simple and loose white clothes; training gear, Carlos guessed, given the two wooden swords resting on the roof beside him.

Jason didn’t turn around at their approach. Shade vanished into Jason’s shadow as Carlos stepped up beside him. He looked out over the island, dotted with little villages. The pagoda was the tallest residence, but the largest was the sprawling royal compound that appeared blurry, as if under a heat-haze shimmer. Carlos knew it was not some meteorological oddity but an observation filter, part of the compound’s protections.

“Rimaros is called the ABC Islands in the other world,” Jason said, not turning his gaze from the vista. “This island is called Aruba, over there. I’ve never been to that world’s version, but I suspect it’s very different, from what I know of it.”

“You said the other world,” Carlos pointed out. “You didn’t say it was your world.”

“Home isn’t where you’re from, Carlos; it’s where you go back to.”

“I suppose it is.”

“You’ve had time with my test results. Am I fully recovered?”

Carlos smiled.

“Yesterday, you were asking me. Today, it sounds like you know.”

Jason nodded.

“Thank you, Carlos. I know things were a little rough between us, but I’m glad we moved past that.”

“Your familiar seems less forgiving.”

“Shade is his own person. And it’s easier to forgive someone who has wronged you than someone who has wronged the people you cherish. In my experience anyway.”

Shadows danced around Jason, draping themselves over and around him, but it was different to how his cloak had appeared in the past. It was deeper, like an aperture into a bottomless abyss. That changed as stars and nebulas appeared within, not as aspects of the cloak but as if viewed from a great distance. It seemed as if Jason had wrapped himself in a portal to some distant, starry realm. Carlos moved around Jason and his perspective shifted, as if Jason’s cloak truly was a window into another place.

“Your cloak didn’t use to look like that.”

“No,” Jason said. “Looks pretty good, though, right?”

“It’s... uncomfortable to look at. Uncanny, like you’re wearing a hole in reality.”

“You know that powers can change appearance, based on their wielders.”

“Yes, but those changes say a lot about the people who have them,” Carlos said. “Aren’t you worried about what this says about you?”

The cloak dissolved and Jason stepped closer to Carlos.

“And what does it say about me, Carlos?”

“That maybe all the powerful people worried about what about what you’re up to are right to be.”

Jason’s smile was that of a snake who found a nest of turtle eggs.

Jason sent an unnerved Carlos away, the pagoda’s sloped roof being restored as they descended from it on an elevating platform. After seeing Carlos out, Jason opened a portal for the first time in months, from the atrium to his personal suite on the top floor.

- The origin and destination for your portal ability are both within your territory. [Astral Gate] has reset the cooldown of your portal ability.

“Huh.”

Jason stepped through the portal, feeling the familiar tingle as he touched on the dimensional boundaries of reality.

“Doesn’t feel any different.”

Jason opened another portal, different to any he had before. Cloud substance rose from the floor, taking the form of an arch before shifting from cloud-stuff to a milky white crystal in which blue and orange light was swirling like liquid in a lava lamp. A curtain of transcendent light in gold, silver and blue shimmered in the arch.

Jason’s normal portals were an essence ability and allowed him to rapidly move between locations. He had also gained the ability to open a portal to his soul space which, at first, only he and his familiars had been able to enter. But after his soul took on physical properties, others could go in, with a significant restriction. The power he held over anyone who entered his

soul space was immense, and their own souls would balk at entry. As such, only those with a profound trust in his good intentions could enter.

The portal Jason had just opened was different. Something about channelling authority through himself, infusing it into the cloud house or probably both, had brought about a fundamental change. He knew that this new arch would admit anyone. He did not know why, or what had changed to allow it, but he could feel it in his soul. Were the people within his soul space somehow protected from him, making it safe for them? Why would the change to his ability do something that seemingly made it weaker?

Jason was contemplating the portal when Dawn alighted on his balcony, her fiery wings vanishing as she walked inside.

“Your ability didn’t get weaker,” she told him.

“Are you reading my mind?”

“Your spirit realm has changed.”

“I’m calling it a soul space now.”

“It doesn’t matter what you call it. It matters what it is.”

“And what is it?”

“You’re aware that you share certain things in common with the messengers.”

“I am.”

“Have you ever wondered who they are the messengers of?”

“I’m wondering now. Is there some kind of super messenger that’s going to invade?”

“They won’t invade. Not in person. That’s what the messengers are for.”

“And what’s the message?”

“Kneel.”

“Oh, that’s tremendous. So, who are these people?”

“Astral kings.”

“I think I see where this is going. A king needs a throne.”

“Yes, they do,” Dawn said. “This is why I was concerned about one coming into your possession. Then you went and used that authority. You either fed it into your soul space and it bled out into your cloud flask, or the other way around. Do you even know which it was?”

“I think it started in the flask, but I can’t be sure. I wasn’t trying to do anything; I was just angry. I’m still not certain what happened.”

“It doesn’t matter now. Between the astral throne and the authority, you’ve established an astral domain that is, I imagine, currently very small. You are an astral king with a very diminutive kingdom.”

“You’re saying I’ve bought real estate in the astral?”

“I’m saying you *are* real estate in the astral. You are your domain, Jason.”

“I’m not entirely clear on how this works. For one thing, I think we’re reaching the limits of using geography as a metaphor for how territory works in the astral. I mean, it’s inside me, and it’s a real space, but it’s also in the astral and not a real space. And how is it different from the way it was before? People could already come in.”

“Your soul space was still more soul than space. An astral domain is a place. A place that you can shape and control, but as real as the world you were born in.”

“If it’s an actual place, now can someone break in?”

“No. It’s your soul.”

“Can they mess me up if I let them in?”

“No. More than ever, you rule that place. It’s even safe for extremely powerful beings to enter now. Safe for you anyway. Not so much for them.”

“But no gatekeeping with trust anymore?”

“You were signalling an unconscious warning to other souls that to enter was dangerous. That was why the

requirement to enter was their trust in you, not yours in them.”

“But now, no warning?”

“You are operating on a different scale now. Volcanos don’t warn you not to walk into them. You’re expected to figure that out by yourself.”

“I’d say blanketing the sky in smoke and ash is a pretty big warning.”

“As is blanketing the sky with your soul projection.”

“I was unconscious for that, remember. It was really that big?”

“Jason, there is a reason every powerful person in this kingdom is paying very close attention to you right now. What you’ve been doing, both in public displays and to yourself, are not things of this world. These are things that belong to the cosmos, and the diamond-rankers who have travelled it will recognise this.”

“Is that why Soramir has always been so nice to me?”

“He has walked the cosmic pathways. He sensed the things in you from the start and recognised, on some level, that you were not a junior but a peer.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It is, perhaps, necessary, given the events in which you are inevitably caught up.”

Jason sighed. “There’s more I need to know, isn’t there? Yet again, my soul is doing things I don’t understand. I mean, I know it; it’s my soul. I just don’t understand. It’s like memorising a science textbook without understanding what it means.”

“I will help you, as much as I can. But now you have recovered and I cannot keep putting off my departure. It will be a few more days, at most.”

Jason looked at the archway.

“You could never go in before, could you?”

“No. It would have been dangerous for both of us.”

“But you said extremely powerful beings could go in now.”

“I did.”

He held out his hand for her to take.

“Shall we?”

WHAT LIGHT DOES

“IT CHANGED AGAIN,” JASON SAID, LOOKING AROUND HIS SOUL space. “Not that I wasn’t expecting it. It’s been changing on the regular, and with losing the bridge and the door, plus gaining the throne and the...”

He sensed strange energies centred on Dawn. She had let go of his hand and staggered, trying to stay on her feet. Jason felt something inside of her, like an unplugged cable, trying to attach itself to the energy of their environment, which was comprised of his soul.

Jason’s power over his soul space was greater than ever and he magically isolated Dawn from the rest of the soul space. She stood up straight, her stricken expression calming.

“Thank you,” she said. “I wasn’t sure what to expect, but that was unpleasant.”

“What was it?” Jason asked.

“I have been connected to the World-Phoenix through my star seed ever since I chose to enter its service,” Dawn explained. “Even when I can’t commune with the World-Phoenix, such as when I am in your spirit domain, the connection remains. Here, however, the connection is lost. My star seed attempted to connect to something else.”

“Me.”

“Yes.”

“I’m pretty sure that would kill me. I’m not a great astral being.”

“You may be right. If we were attached like that, I would drain you like a diamond-rank energy vampire. Unless you could draw enough power from the astral, it would kill you.”

Jason had been trickling energy from the astral through his soul space to sustain himself for a long time. Eliminating his need for regular spirit coin consumption was one thing, but taking the place of a great astral being in a symbiotic soul link with a peak-level diamond-ranker was another.

“I’m not looking to put that to the test,” Jason said. “Also, I’m pretty sure that if I survived the process, I wouldn’t survive your boss finding out.”

“True,” Dawn said with a smile.

“I thought you said it was safe.”

“I said it was safe for you.”

“Are you going to have trouble re-establishing your connection once you leave?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it because the star seed is still intact. It’s rather odd, not having that connection anymore.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, it’s just... the World-Phoenix has been with me since I was not much older than you are now. I forgot what being truly alone feels like. It’s a little disorienting.”

“Alone, you say. I’ll try not to be too hurt by that.”

“Stop teasing; you know what I mean.”

He flashed her a grin.

“Should we get you out of here?” he asked. “Get that connection up and running again?”

“Is it a strain to keep me isolated like this?”

“Not at all.”

“Then let’s take our time. The star seed is quite robust and I have all of eternity to be connected to the World-Phoenix.”

Jason resumed looking around his again-reshaped soul space. The portal arch they had come through was still

standing but the energy within had vanished, closing it off until Jason opened it again. It was located at the edge of what would be a large public square, if there had been a public to inhabit it. In the centre of the square was the familiar pagoda, although this one was larger than those in Jason's spirit domains. It was notably wider and ten storeys instead of the usual five.

Jason floated into the air, not using his cloak as wings but simply using his power over the environment. He lifted Dawn up alongside him as they rose to take in the entire space. The sky above was the same clear blue of the world outside, the sun beaming down on what turned out to be an island. It looked to be roughly thirty kilometres by fifteen, with widely differing elevations. There was a small mountain, sandy beaches and what looked to be an area sunk below sea level.

There was a lagoon at the opposite end of the island to the mountain, with a small town running along the shore. A larger population centre, minus the population, was located in the middle of the island. This was where the pagoda square was located. The rest of the island was covered in various terrain, much of which Jason recognised from the previous iteration of his soul space. Plant life dominated, ranging from carefully manicured gardens to dense jungle, although open pathways wound through even the wildest of areas. Jason could also feel a network of tunnels and caverns running underneath the island, filled with luminescent fungus.

Waterways were all over, from creeks running through the jungle, to underground rivers, to garden water features, to canals in and around the larger town. Jason knew that these were the physical representations of magic flowing in and out from the astral, supplying power to this space, along with his spirit domains, his cloud house and his own body. He could feel the magic moving, like blood through a circulatory system.

“How do you feel?” Dawn asked him.

“Like... I don't want to say it.”

“Like a god.”

Jason nodded.

“It feels wrong to say out loud,” he said softly.

“The truth is, Jason, you’re more than a god here. Gods belong to their world, but they don’t embody it. They have to share, and they’re expendable. Look at Purity. But you don’t belong to this world; you are this world.”

“I’m not sure I like having this kind of power. I don’t think I can trust myself with it.”

“Then leave this place empty and have power over no one. Your power does not extend beyond it, so as omnipotent as you are here, outside it, you are largely unchanged.”

“Largely?”

“There are a few things we should talk about. Oh, and you’ve almost certainly stopped aging.”

“Wait, what? You’re saying I’m never going to die?”

“Of course you’re going to die. Probably a lot; you can’t seem to help yourself. Just not from old age.”

“Huh. I think I’ll have to sit with that one a while before it sinks in.”

“The truth is, you’ve probably been ageless since you accepted the World-Phoenix’s blessing and changed your body. At the very least, it would have expanded your life cycle by orders of magnitude.”

“You never felt the need to tell me?”

“Jason, I’ve seen enough people hit diamond rank to know what someone who probably will look like. Soramir saw the same thing the first time he met you. Adventurers who are going to make it have something about them; on your world, they call it the X factor. You have it, Sophie has it. Rufus has it, even with all that self-doubt. Emir Bahadir saw it in you. Even Rufus himself. He talks a lot about coming from a school, but he’s seen a lot of adventurers, good and bad. He knew you had it from the beginning.”

“What about my other friends?”

“It’s a good team you have. They all have the potential, although some in different ways than others. Gary and Travis will have to take a craftsman’s path. They both use monster cores now.”

“Can you even get to diamond using cores?” Jason asked.

“There is more to high-rank progress than simply killing monsters or absorbing cores. In many ways, those dedicated to a craft have an advantage in this regard. But these are things that will be shared with you as you draw closer to gold rank.”

“Wouldn’t it help to know them now?”

“Don’t be distracted. Silver rank is the last time essence users get to advance by simply charging headlong into adventure. Enjoy this time. And you have enough to be going on with, Jason.”

“That’s definitely true. Hey, what about my spirit domains?”

“What about them?”

“You said my power doesn’t extend beyond this realm, but I have my spirit domains.”

“There is only so much you can do with them. Especially for now.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you know a lot more about where this is all going than me?”

“I know a lot more about everything than you.”

He looked at her with arched eyebrows.

“Everything that matters,” she corrected. “Eighties television does not count.”

Jason looked out to the horizon where his senses grew fuzzy.

“Astral space rules?” he asked.

“Yes. Things will grow strange at the limits of the space as what is real and what isn’t becomes uncertain.”

“The space here is fixed,” Jason observed. “In its previous state, the region was mutable. It wouldn’t only change according to my directions, but also on its own. I can still reshape it, but it feels a lot more set in place now.”

“It’s a more stable reality. You’ll realise, in time, that your ability to control it is far more intricate than you currently understand. Shall we explore it a little?”

“No,” Jason said. “I’ve been waiting on learning about the astral throne and the astral gate for far too long. Let’s go take a look at them.”

“What’s it like?” Dawn asked as they descended through the sky. “On some level, you know this place down to the smallest particle, do you not? Is it all in your mind at once?”

“Not even close. That sounds like some god-level thinking-about-everything-at-once stuff. It’s more like knowing mathematics. You’re not consciously thinking about it, but when you need to calculate your points at the end of a Eurogame, you remember how addition works without thinking about it.”

“Or multiplication.”

“I still don’t understand how that is your problem with *Bunny Kingdom*. It’s not difficult and you have the mind of an ancient and powerful diamond-ranker.”

“My problem isn’t the multiplication.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Why are you so caught up on this? I’m allowed to not like things.”

Jason grumbled as they landed back in the square, in front of the pagoda’s large double doors. The building was made of the now-familiar dark crystal with sparkles of light shifting within its smoky opacity. The other buildings in the soul space were all comprised of primarily white cloud material, with

sunset-coloured trim. This included the ones surrounding the massive, open square.

“I don’t like that this reminds me of the worship squares they have in Pallimustus,” Jason said.

“This place all comes from you,” Dawn reminded him.

“Everyone has things they don’t like about themselves.”

He looked up at the looming tower.

“Astral throne. I bet there’s a throne room.”

“You don’t know?”

“There is,” he said wearily. “I knew it the moment I wondered.”

They moved to the doors, which opened on their own, and entered a larger version of the atrium that made up the ground floor of all Jason’s pagodas. This one was more elaborate, complete with the same mezzanine levels from which a waterfall spilled into a pond. The normally open floor space was divided up into areas by walls of greenery and water features spanned by little bridges. There were arches covered in flowering vines and free-standing leafy plants potted directly into the floor. The largest open space was just inside the doors, on the opposite side of which was a desk manned by a shadowy figure.

This was not Shade, although the shadow entity looked a lot like Shade’s earlier incarnations of a hooded figure, before he acquired his butler fetish. The difference was that inside the hood of this cloaked figure was the same nebulous eye that Jason and Gordon had, although this one was the size of a face.

“You have a reception desk,” Dawn said.

“It’s a complicated building,” Jason said. “I’m still not certain what to make of these avatars. They’re a part of this astral throne business, aren’t they?”

“In a roundabout manner. You have them because you are an astral king. You’re an astral king because you have an astral kingdom. That’s what the messengers call spaces like this. You

have an astral kingdom because you possess an astral throne and an astral gate.”

“So, ‘yes’ is what you’re saying.”

“If you want to be reductive.”

“I’ve got a lot going on right now, Dawn; I’m downright eager to be reductive.”

“Which is always a great idea when you’re dealing with massive interdimensional forces governing states of reality. I was going to explain the third element that you eventually need to complete this space, but that can wait. Best to wait, in fact. It’s not something even diamond-rankers use lightly.”

“There’s a third thing? I’ve got an astral throne and an astral gate. Is it an astral window? Astral stairs? An astral booth? I don’t suppose I’d get lucky and find an astral barbecue grill.”

“No. It’s called a soul forge, and it’s for soul engineering. You once found a sword shrouded in a soul transformed into a barrier. That was a result of sword engineering.”

“I was going to ask a bunch of questions, but hearing about souls being used as crafting mats has put me right off. I think I might follow your advice and stay clear of that stuff for now. Let’s go check out the astral throne. Elevating platforms are this way.”

As they moved across the atrium, Jason looked around. He flung his arms out flamboyantly and the walls turned transparent, replacing the diffuse ambient light with natural light from outside. He stopped and examined the space, not quite satisfied. He floated himself and Dawn a few metres into the air.

“I like the natural light,” he said, “but it’s not filling the room the way I’d like. Too many shadowy areas, with all these standing plants and such.”

“You’re thinking about it like a mortal,” Dawn said.

“What do you mean?”

“If you don’t like what the light does, make it do something else.”

“What? You can’t just change what light does.”

“No. But in this place, *you* can.”

“I don’t know how to do that. How does light work?”

“However you want it to.”

He looked at her sceptically and she pointed up.

“That’s your sun in the sky, Jason. Just try it.”

Jason looked at her with uncertainty, but concentrated. After a moment, the way the room was lit up went through a sequence of changes. At various stages, the light fell differently, strobed, turned blue and, for a brief moment, disappeared entirely as it turned into the scent of the ocean.

“You’re not very good at this,” Dawn pointed out as they floated in the dark.

The light came back.

“It wasn’t that long ago I was selling staplers in bulk,” Jason said as the light came back. “Now I’m trying to invent bendy light when all I have for reference is the UV grenades from the second *Blade* movie, and they were hot nonsense. I wasn’t exactly brought up in an environment that primed me to be the dimensional overlord of an admittedly small and empty fief. Not all of us had outworlder parents.”

“Have,” Dawn said. “My parents are still alive.”

“Then why did your boss send you to me instead of them when you needed grounding in mortal sensibilities?”

“We haven’t seen each other in a while. Also, they aren’t the best for keeping someone grounded.”

“No?”

“They have a lot going on.”

“Like what?”

“The specifics don’t matter.”

“It *really* feels like the specifics are going to matter.”

“They’re... often busy with work.”

“Their work being?”

“Administration.”

“Administration?”

“Yes.”

“Administration of what?”

Dawn refused to meet his eyes.

“Dawn...”

“They might rule a small... intergalactic empire.”

Jason burst out laughing.

“Travis was right! You are a magic space princess!”

Dawn glared at him as he continued uproariously laughing.

“You should watch out for chunky slugs who want to put you in a bikini.”

Dawn continued to glare as Jason attempted to smother his laughter and failed miserably.

“You realise you need to finish fixing the light, right?” she asked him.

Jason shook his head as he kept laughing.

“I’m just pointing that out because you’ve set the pond on fire.”

“What? Oh crap.”

WHY ANYONE WOULD PICK YOU

THE ELEVATING PLATFORM STOPPED AT THE TOP FLOOR OF THE pagoda, depositing Jason and Dawn at one end of a long throne room. She turned to look at him.

“I know,” he said, wilting with shame.

They looked to the far end of the room, both taking on surprised expressions as they saw the throne itself. The room around it was ostentatious and perfectly designed for pomp and ceremony, with decorative weapon racks and tapestries depicting Jason doing better in certain fights than he had done in reality, strictly speaking. At the end of the room, stairs led up to a platform, above which hung the astral throne.

“A hammock chair?” Dawn asked.

“I feel much better about this whole thing now,” Jason said. “All this other nonsense will have to go, though.”

With a sweeping gesture, everything around them dissolved and swirled around like colourful glitter caught up in a chaotic wind.

“You don’t have to wave your arms like a magician every time you change things,” Dawn pointed out.

“Yes, I do.”

“No, Jason. You do not.”

“Are you an astral king?”

Dawn’s only response was a weary groan.

“Exactly,” Jason said. “One of us knows what he’s talking about.”

“Are you actually attempting to gaslight me over your need to look like a magician?”

Jason’s clothes dissolved like the rest of the room and reformed as a tuxedo and top hat. He waggled his eyebrows at Dawn.

“Abracadabra.”

Dawn shook her head.

The room adjusted, this time taking on the form of a long hall. There was a row of tables with sunken, felt-covered surfaces, like snooker tables without the holes. There were also comfortable couches, along with glass-fronted cupboards and refrigerators filled with drinks and snacks. The walls were no longer lined with tapestries and decorative weapons but square shelf cubbies, except where space was occupied by cupboards, fridges and a section down one end that looked like wine racks.

“Are those Kallax shelves?” Dawn asked, looking at the square cubbies.

“Yep.”

“You have the power to remake this world, right down to the laws of physics, and you installed Ikea shelving.”

“It’s what Greg would have wanted. I guess we could check. Shade?”

“Mr Asano,” Shade’s voice came from Jason’s shadow. “I am not going to attempt to contact the Reaper in order to have him ask your deceased friend how he would like the board games he left you stored in the realm over which you have god-like power.”

“Please?”

“No.”

Board games appeared, stacked onto the shelves, sweeping along the wall like a wave.

“This place still serves as storage for my inventory,” Jason said. “It always used to store items in a kind of stasis. Now it’s more like the stuff I store exists in a potential state where I can reproduce it, in the condition in which it entered. Am I a *Star Trek* replicator?”

Dawn smiled.

“I was wondering when we would get to this part,” she said. “If we’re going to discuss the specifics, we should take a closer look at the astral throne.”

They walked down the long room as the shelves continued to fill.

“How many games did Greg have?” Dawn asked. “I didn’t realise it was anywhere near this many.”

“That’s because you’ve only seen the part of the collection I leave in the games room of the cloud house,” Jason said. “These are the extra ones I’ve been keeping in my inventory.”

“There aren’t really enough to fill this entire room, are there?”

“Of course not. See down the end, that section that looks like wine racks? It’s storage for playmats.”

“Why anyone would pick you to save an entire planet I have no idea.”

“You think I’m maybe a little more frivolous than you’d expect from an agent of your boss?”

“You can be quite ominous when the mood takes you, but you can never seem to find the middle ground. Melodrama seems to be your base state. I’m used to dealing with people who are a bit more... predictable in their approach.”

“You think I’m inconsistent.”

“Honestly, yes. But, to my great surprise, I much prefer your fun side to your dangerous one. I’m not sure why the World-Phoenix chose you, however. You aren’t exactly the most predictable operative.”

“Your boss prefers my fun side too. Or sees it as a necessity, at the very least.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

Jason held his arms out, gesturing at the walls around them.

“This is why,” he said. “Because I’d turn a throne room into a games room. I’m willing to bet that for all I try to do the unexpected, everything has fallen within the calculations of your boss. Infinite experience means the ability to calculate infinite contingencies. The World-Phoenix realised that whomever it used as a cat’s paw would get their hands on power that maybe they shouldn’t. Such as winding up as an astral king, three ranks too early.”

Dawn nodded to herself.

“The power to fulfil our deepest desires reveals what those desires are,” she mused, then looked at Jason with a smile. “And you have the desires of an idiot.”

“Yep,” he agreed proudly.

They reached the end of the room and the short set of stairs leading to the platform where a wicker hammock chair hung from the high ceiling on a rope, padded with plush cushions. They ascended the stairs and stood in front of it.

“The astral throne isn’t like the door you absorbed from the Builder,” Dawn told him.

“I know,” Jason said with a nod. “I can feel the difference. This is a part of me. The system message didn’t say I absorbed the astral throne; it said I established it. I stripped something called a fundament core out of the door and consumed it.”

“That door was designed to remake reality of a fundamental level. You somehow took the core mechanism from it and your soul deciphered the means to do that, at least within your soul realm.”

“My soul seems very adaptive. In the transformation zones, it effectively learned how to remake reality. Is this something the World-Phoenix did to me?”

“No. Every soul is adaptable like that. Think of a soul as an infinite mass of shapeless potential. It has the power to effectively do anything, but because it’s formless, it can’t do anything. But show it how to take a shape and it can mould itself into that form. Some forms are relatively simple and limited, like most racial gifts, so they reach most of their potential quickly and show little to no growth. Others grow stronger as the soul better understands how to take that complex form.”

“Like when I was learning the spirit domain power. Or essence abilities.”

“Exactly. And this is why a great astral being’s blessing can’t impart any negative influence; all a blessing does is show a soul a pattern it can take for itself. The blessing doesn’t actually impart anything.”

“And that’s what happened with the astral throne,” Jason said. “My soul devoured the fundamental core and used it as a blueprint for the astral throne.”

“Exactly. The function of the astral throne is to allow you to rewrite reality. Within your soul, that power is limitless. Outside it, you will have some ability to do so within your spirit domain, but your soul’s influence is also clashing with an entire reality.”

“Making the results a lot more limited.”

“Yes.”

“That authority I used,” Jason said, frowning as his mind was making connections. “It came from the Builder’s door and had construction and dimension aspects. I think when I used it on the cloud flask, my soul figured out how to influence those aspects through my spirit domains. It learned the shape of how to do that. Or maybe it already knew how. I had a sealed ability that was unsealed when I used the authority. I think my soul sealed the power away because I wasn’t ready for it, and the authority cracked that seal.”

“Understanding the mechanisms is important,” Dawn told him, “but more for the future than today. I just wanted you to

understand the basics before moving on to the practical aspects of what the throne can accomplish.”

“Like how stuff gets stored in here now,” Jason said.

“Yes. You have full control over this space, matter and energy. We’ve discussed how the soul takes shapes. This place exists within your soul, so you can shape it as you please. And because your soul is also a physical thing, so is this a physical space. You can bring things in and remake them.”

“But there are limits, right? Not on me, but on things other than me that enter this space.”

“Your intuitive understanding is good,” Dawn said. “You can change things you’ve brought from the outside in here, but those changes will only remain when the object leaves if the changes are consistent with the objects in question.”

“If I bake an apple pie in here, with normal apple pie ingredients, it’ll still be an apple pie once it’s back outside,” Jason said.

“Yes. But if you turn those apples into apricots and bake those into a pie, it will break down once it is removed from this space.”

“And I won’t be able to change souls.”

“No. Just as the Builder could not invade yours, you cannot invade another’s. Unless they invite you to.”

“Which the Builder tried to torment me into doing,” Jason said.

Jason and Dawn shared a look, but neither voiced that Jason could do the same to someone trapped in his soul realm.

“What about things I create here?” Jason asked. “Can I make spirit coins?”

“I don’t know. Can you?”

Jason held out his hand and six coins appeared, one each of a lesser spirit coin through to a diamond one.

“These aren’t quite right,” he said. “I can feel it. Let me try again.”

The coins vanished and another set appeared.

“I tapped into the magic veins running through this place to fill them with magic,” he explained. “I thought about what you said about external forces needing to change within their own natural parameters. Spirit coins are just congealed magic, effectively, so I grabbed some that my soul pulled in from the outside and turned it into coins.”

“They don’t seem any different from the first set.”

“They are, I can feel it,” Jason said. “Everything up to the silver coin should be fine to take out. I don’t think the gold and diamond ones will hold, though.”

“Limited by the rank your soul has learned to use?”

“Yeah. I can loot higher-rank coins from higher-rank monsters because they serve as a rank template for my looting power, but my soul by itself can’t do the job.”

Dawn looked at Jason thoughtfully.

“What?”

“You know, there’s something I’ve been waiting to do for a long time, and now might be just right.”

“Oh?”

Dawn’s fist crashed into Jason’s face with all of her diamond-rank strength and speed. She reeled back, clutching her fist as Jason stumbled back, startled but unharmed.

“What was that?”

“What are you made of?” she asked, still rubbing the hand she hurt punching Jason ineffectually.

“I’m not sure. Infinity? Is that something you can be made of?”

“Why did it hurt?”

“My house. My rules. You should just wait until I’m diamond rank, like you planned. And maybe don’t do it somewhere that I’m the alpha and the omega.”

Jason made the pain vanish from Dawn's hand, shaking his head as he turned his attention back to the coins in his hand.

"Even without gold and diamond coins, I can effectively make infinite amounts of money like this. I'd better, you know, not do that. I don't want to go collapsing economies or getting any mercantile gods cranky at me."

"Very sensible," Dawn said. "They won't mind you injecting a little extra money into the economy here and there, so long as you restrain yourself. You're far from the only person to get some quirk of power that allows them to produce effectively infinite money. They only get stomped on if they abuse it, since the gods don't like to deny people the use of their abilities. With some notable exceptions."

"It's not like I was hurting for money in the first place."

"We should get back to discussing the potential of your astral throne."

"Good, because I have a lot of questions. What happens if I feed someone some dodgy spirit coins that I didn't inject magic into properly? It would sustain their body while they were in here, but what happens when they leave and the magic that was sustaining them turned out to be fake?"

"That would be fine because the changes they underwent in your soul space were in accordance with their nature."

"And if I changed their eye colour?"

"You couldn't make that change soul-deep. Their body and soul would be in conflict. A normal-ranker would be able to sustain that because their bodies are less closely linked to their souls. This is how something like the Alzheimer's affecting your grandmother can afflict a normal-ranker without killing them. An essence user's body becomes much more a projection of their soul as they rank up, though, so the conflict would cause greater problems."

"Once they were out of my soul space where I control everything."

"Precisely."

“Okay, so what about if a normal-ranker ate a magic apple? Do the nutrients they’ve digested go away?”

“How many of these questions are going to be about eating things?”

“I’d say a good seventy to eighty percent. What if I bring in real flour, but conjure up all the other ingredients and bake a cake?”

Dawn ran her hands over her face.

“This is going to be a long night.”

ASTRAL EMPEROR

JASON'S ASTRAL THRONE WAS A HAMMOCK CHAIR. HE MADE A spreading gesture and it became a hanging chair with room for two.

“Join me, Space Princess?”

Dawn shook her head as they sat together. The chair swivelled to face the wall behind them, which was the back wall of the lengthy hall. The wall sank into the floor, opening up to give them a view of Jason's soul space island. A pleasant breeze wafted in.

“Hey,” Jason said thoughtfully. “I can't penetrate a soul, even here, but what about stripping off some gunk that's been painted over the top of one.”

“You're talking about the Order of the Redeeming Light people.”

“Them, vampires, whoever. Anyone who's had some nasty goo drizzled over their soul. It would be nice if I could undo what's been done to Sophie's mum.”

“You remember what I said about natural processes. If you just magic it away, the modifications you made to the people would kill them the moment they left your soul space. You would need to understand the process of extricating the taint without the person dying.”

“I can't do anything for them, then?”

“It may not be entirely hopeless. I imagine that one of the larger problems with undoing such deep-rooted

transformations is that taking someone from a vampiric or similar state is too traumatising for the body. The cure would kill.”

“You’re thinking Carlos can help?”

“It’s possible,” Dawn said. “If he can help you understand the process of taking someone from a live tainted state to a live untainted state, you might be able to skip the middle part.”

“Which is the bit where they die horribly?”

“It is. Under normal conditions, the transition phase is lethal, but here, it doesn’t have to be. So long as you’re able to follow the actual process, it might be possible.”

“It doesn’t sound like the easy solution I was hoping for.”

“Is it ever?”

“I’ll need to learn how it all works pretty thoroughly, from what you’re describing.”

“Yes, but not the level of an expert. So long as you have a respectable grasp of what’s going on, you should be able to find success.”

“It’s still going to take a lot of time.”

“But time well spent, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure I’ll have that time if I’m leaving Rimaros.”

“Perhaps.”

Jason’s eyes narrowed as he looked at her with suspicion.

“Have you been hatching plots and schemes during my convalescence?”

“You’ll have to wait and see. Where did you put the astral gate?”

“Do most astral kings put it with their astral throne?”

“Yes, it’s normally in the throne room.”

“So, other astral kings have throne rooms as well? And you were judging me.”

“What did I say that was judgemental?”

“I could feel you judging me. There was a vibe.”

“A vibe?”

“Yes, a vibe. Are you denying the judgy vibe?”

“No,” Dawn conceded. “But in my defence, you are wearing a top hat.”

“And I look very dapper.”

Jason was still wearing the magician tuxedo he had changed his clothes into.

“Hey, there’s a colourful scarf in my pocket. Will you pull it out for me?”

“No.”

Jason let out a disappointed sound and took off his top hat, turning it over and looking down into it.

“Sorry, bloke; she’s not into it. It’s going to be rabbit stew. Yes, I thought girls were into magic tricks too. No, she’s definitely won’t let me saw her in half.”

“Jason, please stop.”

A rabbit poked its head out of the hat, resting its front paws on the brim.

“Look, lady,” it said. “If you don’t like magic, that’s your business, but we’re having a conversation here. So, unless you’re interested in picking a card or something, how about you jog on.”

“Hey,” Jason told it. “Don’t be rude.”

“Don’t you start,” the rabbit told him. “I’m not the one having a conversation with a rabbit he invented.”

Dawn got up out of the chair.

“I’m going to go find the astral gate,” she told him, and then set off for the elevating platform.

“Look what you did,” the rabbit told Jason as they watched her walk away. “You are terrible with women.”

“Says the guy who’s meant to be my wingman.”

“I’m an imaginary rabbit!”

On an elevating platform with Jason, Dawn shot more than one wary glance at the top hat now back on his head.

“I get the difference between a god and a great astral being,” Jason said as the platform carried them down through the building. “Where do astral kings fit in?”

“Somewhere in the middle,” Dawn told him. “Great astral beings are in charge of the cosmos and inhabit the deep astral. Gods are like regional managers of full-blown universes. Astral kings are what amounts to sentient miniature universes.”

“I’m a mini-universe?”

“Jason, we’re inside your soul. In an elevator.”

“Fair enough. This is a weird day. I mean, it’s been a weird few years, but finding out I’m a mini-universe is way up there as weird days go. Definitely top eight.”

“Top eight?”

“The list doesn’t always have to be a top ten.”

“What are the other seven?”

“I once found a pickle that looked like Bryan Cranston. *Breaking Bad* Bryan Cranston, not *Malcolm in the Middle* Bryan Cranston.”

“The day you found a pickle is up there with finding out you’re a miniature universe?”

“You didn’t let me finish. I then found another pickle—the same day, mind you—that looked like *Malcolm in the Middle* Bryan Cranston.”

She gave him a flat look.

“It had fallen in some hair,” he explained. “It was kind of gross to pick up, but how could you not?”

“Very easily, I suspect. What were you doing that you kept finding pickles?”

“Water skiing.”

“You found multiple pickles while water skiing?”

“I told you it was a weird day.”

The elevating platform reached the ground floor atrium and kept descending into the sub-levels. Unlike the upper levels, where the open-sided platform allowed passengers to look around, the subterranean levels were encased in a cylinder.

“I thought this would feel more like a normal elevator,” Jason said, “but it feels more like the elevator stage from a side-scrolling beat ‘em up.”

“Is that a video game?”

“Yeah. They always have an elevator level where mooks just keep jumping in to fight.”

Jason looked up at the tunnel they were descending through just as ninjas started dropping down, landing in a fighting pose.

“Jason...”

“Fine,” Jason sulked, the ninjas vanishing at a dismissive gesture from him. “You’re no fun.”

She looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“Okay, you’re a little fun.”

“How did you have so much trouble with changing the light, yet ninjas and a talking rabbit aren’t a problem?”

“It’s about understanding, like you said. I don’t know anything about light refraction, but I know plenty about ninjas.”

“You do?”

“Sure. Like those ninjas just now. I knew they weren’t a threat because there were too many of them.”

“How does having too many make them not a threat?”

“The Law of Conservation of Ninjutsu.”

“I’m going to regret asking this, but the law of what?”

“Conservation of Ninjutsu. Ninjutsu is a finite resource. One ninja is dangerous because they have all the ninjutsu, but a bunch of them in the same place spreads it too thin and they turn into mooks.”

“I was right: I regret asking. I think I need to get you out of this place. It’s like you’re trying to recreate *Alice in Wonderland*, but with tragic eighties references.”

“I’m doing no such thing. And what do you mean, tragic?”

“It’s like you’re trying make *Team Knight Rider* as written by Lewis Carroll.”

“That’s just low.”

The elevating platform stopped and they stepped out into a tunnel that had a mosaic floor tiled in shades of teal. What drew the attention, though, was that the walls and ceiling were glass, on the other side of which was water filled with aquatic life. There was no lighting, but the teeming sea life was all bioluminescent.

“I like this,” Dawn said.

There was a small tramcar waiting, like a golf buggy on a rail, that took off as soon as they sat down.

“I could have just moved us instantaneously to the destination,” Jason pointed out.

“Jason, you could have left us where we were and moved the entire reality so the destination came to us.”

“Uh, sure,” Jason said. “But sometimes, life is about the journey. Isn’t that what your boss wanted me to remind you of when it sent you to me?”

“I suppose it was, in a way.”

“It’s not just pretty down here, though,” Jason said. “The astral gate is the centre of all the magic coming in from the astral. All the water in the domain—the magical arteries—

originates out of the spot we're heading to. It's the real heart of the place."

"What sense do you get from the astral gate?" Dawn asked.

"I can feel it's a gateway to the deep astral, and I can pull a good chunk of magic in through it. I can probably use it to recharge my mana quickly, although I suspect it wouldn't be a smooth process. I'm pretty sure filtering raw magic through my soul realm to refine it into mana would sting like a right prick. Beyond using it as a battery for my spirit domains, though, I'm a bit wary of using it."

"Good," Dawn said as they approached the end of the tunnel. "The astral throne is something you should be able to get a handle on now because it governs your soul space's internal functions. The astral gate is about interacting with dimensional forces outside of your domains."

"Poking my head out into the cosmos."

"Yes. Which you should hold off on for quite some time."

"I got that impression myself," he said, pointing at the massive doors at the end of the tunnel. They were heavy industrial steel, with a large white sign with plain red lettering.

SUPER DANGEROUS MAGIC STUFF – DO NOT COME IN.

Jason casually gestured and the doors opened with a reluctant squeal of metal. Behind them was another set of doors and another sign.

CLIVE, WHAT DID I JUST SAY?

Jason opened these doors as well, revealing a third set.

SERIOUSLY, CLIVE, TURN BACK. THE NEXT SIGN IS JUST AN ANIMATED IMAGE OF YOUR PARENTS GOING AT IT IN AN EEL TANK. THERE'S SOUND AND EVERYTHING. IT'S SUPER GROSS.

"How many of these doors are there?" Dawn asked.

“Another eight or nine. They get pretty graphic after the sixth one, so I’ll just delete them up to the end.”

“More graphic than Clive’s parents in an eel tank?”

“Oh, yeah. The eighth door has animated tentacles with... how much anime did you watch while you were on Earth?”

“A bit.”

“Then I’ll just say it’s bad. You can probably imagine.”

Jason gestured again and the tunnel was suddenly empty, up to a last set of doors some way farther down. They walked, going over one wet section of the floor, and another that was sticky.

“What was that?” Dawn asked.

“Do you really want to know?”

“No, now that you ask.”

“Just be sure and wash your shoes. Actually...”

Jason wandered over to the glass separating them from the bioluminescent sea creatures and conjured a small vial into his hand. Then he tapped on the glass and a small keg-style tap appeared. He filled the vial, closed the tap, and it melded back into the glass wall.

“Here you go,” he said, handing the vial to Dawn. She held it up in front of her face, peering at it, then at the outside of the glass tunnel.

“Jason, did you make a subterranean crystal wash reservoir and stock it with glowing fish?”

“Absolutely not. The cleanliness of these fish is a coincidence. Let’s check out that last door, yeah?”

Dawn shook her head as Jason moved on. She poured the crystal wash over her sticky shoes before following along. The last door also had a sign.

OKAY, CLIVE, I KNOW YOU HAD HELP TO GET THIS FAR. BELINDA, SHAME ON YOU. I HOPE YOU AT

LEAST GAVE CLIVE SOME FRESH PANTS AFTER DOOR NINE.

“Clive’s a pretty persistent guy when it comes to new astral magic,” Jason said.

“Oh, I know,” Dawn said. “He’s been very dogged in asking for guidance since I started spending more time in your cloud building. He even brought me flowers once.”

“Oh, that’s sweet.”

The last doors were the end of the tunnel, where it met a stone wall. The doors parted at a gesture from Jason, opening into a massive sea cave grotto. It was roughly circular, with a metal catwalk winding its way around, bolted into the stone. The water below glowed with a blue light, which was the only illumination in the room. In the centre of the water, a plume of water was in a constant state of geysering up, making the air wet with mist.

“There’s a lot of unadulterated magic in these droplets,” Dawn observed. “If I weren’t diamond rank, or if you weren’t untouchable in this place, it would be very dangerous in here.”

“I put up, like, a dozen huge, locked doors with warning signs. What else do you want? An electric fence?”

“You could seal it off entirely.”

“No. The magic needs to flow from here, and I don’t want Clive trying to swim up a tunnel of raw magic so he can poke the source with a stick.”

Dawn leaned on the rail and looked at the geyser. Like all the water, it shone with a blue light.

“You know the Builder is assembling his own world from the parts he steals by plundering planets of their astral spaces for parts.”

“Yeah, it’s his whole deal.”

“He’s trying to become not just a god but an astral king version of a god. To embody the world he’s created, on a scale unlike anything ever seen.”

“Like an astral emperor.”

“If you like. No one knows why he’s doing it.”

“I think your boss knows. I’d be willing to put money down that she’s somehow involved in his motivation for assembling that thing. The way she flipped his switch like that is super suspicious.”

Dawn frowned.

“Sorry; I know you don’t like me ragging on the World-Phoenix.”

“It’s not that,” Dawn said. “Almost the opposite, in fact.”

“What do you mean?”

“Every time we’ve discussed what the World-Phoenix did to the Builder, my instinct has been to dismiss it and move on. Now I find that impetus is absent. It would seem that the World-Phoenix has a subtle influence that even I was unaware of.”

Both of their thoughts turned to the star seed within Dawn, rendered inactive by Jason’s spirit realm.

“You know, Carlos knows the process to safely extract a star seed. I could go get it and have that thing out of you right quick.”

“No, thank you, Jason. You don’t have to agree with everything your employer does to work for them.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t ethically sourced coffee in the break room, Dawn. You probably run around saving universes and whatnot. We’re talking about squijillions of lives.”

“Squijillions?”

“I had to call it something, and the numbers that high don’t have names. I’m pretty sure at that point they stop really being numbers.”

“What are you talking about? Numbers don’t stop being numbers.”

“I’ve heard that if you go high enough, the numbers go all funny. Like reality at the edge of an astral space. It’s a maths thing, right?”

“No,” Dawn said. “That’s not how mathematics works. At all.”

“So, no star seed extraction?”

“No. And it may be time to call it a night. You seem to have a handle on the throne and the gate. The throne is safe to play with, and you’re getting good use from the gate without playing with forces you shouldn’t. The only thing you should know is that you may find yourself able to tap into the powers of the gate and throne to enhance some of your abilities. At your rank, you must do so carefully and infrequently. The backlash will be nothing compared to what you’ve just been through, but it will probably put you out of whatever fight you were in. Especially the astral gate.”

“Well, then,” Jason mused. “Whatever shall we do with the rest of our evening?”

GOODBYES

JASON AND DAWN STOOD IN FRONT OF THE ARCH THAT WOULD take them out of his soul space and back into normal reality.

“Worried about giving up god-like power?” Dawn asked.

“Oddly, no. I feel like maybe not having limits isn’t so good for my mentality. I think I’m starting to understand why the World-Phoenix wanted to keep you grounded with mortal sensibility.”

Unhappiness crossed Dawn’s face and uncertainty entered her body language. It startled Jason because, even though it was subtle, it was not something he’d seen from her before.

“It’s time for you to go, isn’t it?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I’ve lingered longer than I should have. I want to say goodbye to you here. I’m not influenced by my star seed right now, but it goes further than that. I’ve allowed myself to change lately. Indulged in simple pleasures. But once I walk through that gate, it’s time to put those things aside and look to the future.”

They faced each other, Jason taking her hands in his.

“There was always a clock on this,” he said. “We knew that from the start. I don’t think either of us would have pursued it otherwise. When will I see you again?”

“The less you know about that, the better. And after you do, it’ll be hard for you. Some things I don’t have the power to fight.”

She smiled.

“But you’re the guy who fights them anyway. I’ve done my best to help you, but it’s on you to do the impossible. Again. In the coming years, enjoy yourself, but also get strong. As strong as you can, as fast as you can. When the time comes, you’re going to need all the power you can muster.”

“Don’t I always?”

Jason and Dawn emerged from the portal. Jason’s top hat and tuxedo, disintegrated immediately, leaving him naked just as Humphrey came around a corner.

“Did I hear the thwip sound of a portal opening? Finally. How long were you intending to...”

Humphrey took in the naked Jason.

“STASH! I thought we’d moved past—”

“Actually, I’m the genuine article,” Jason, pulling a hat from his inventory to hide his modesty. Behind Humphrey, a naked, moustachioed Jason sprinted past.

“WOOO!”

Jason was a little uneasy, having watched Dawn change after she left his soul space. Her star seed reconnected, but as Dawn had said, there was more to it than that. It was like she put on a mask, with the relaxed Dawn of the last few weeks disappearing under the guise of the Hierophant of the World-Phoenix. In some ways, Dawn had left the moment she emerged from the portal, even if she had yet to actually go.

Jason did pick up some odd vibes between Dawn and the others through their auras, but something in Dawn’s aura felt like a warning. It was subtle and barely there, enough that only

he would sense it. It flashed a warning of danger and he didn't interrogate the idea further.

Dawn's final farewell was on the balcony of Jason's personal suite, just himself, Dawn and Farrah. The time that the trio had been companions on Earth hadn't been that long, but it had felt like it was the three of them against the cosmos. While she had made her goodbyes with the others, they did not have the same connection, despite what Clive's dismay suggested.

Jason watched Dawn and Farrah share their final words, but Farrah, like Jason, recognised the Dawn that was their friend had already gone. Wings of flame lit up on Dawn's back and she flew into the air. She ascended blindingly fast, until even their silver-rank eyes could spot nothing but a glow, rising into the sky.

"It's almost a flare, signalling the end of the monster surge and our issues with the Builder," Farrah observed.

"The monster surge, maybe. I can't help but think we'll run into the Builder and his lackeys again."

"Not me," Farrah said. "If you want to go off having insane cosmic adventures, that's on you. Look at who I'm talking to: of course you will."

"I think I'm ready for some more grounded adventures. Even Dawn said I'll get the chance, at least for a while. If I can only settle all this attention on me. You ready for some nice, clean adventuring?"

"Actually, no," Farrah told him.

He turned from where he had been watching Dawn's light disappear into the sky and looked at her, resisting the urge to peek at her emotions through her aura.

"Rufus and Gary have both found callings outside of adventuring," Farrah said.

"You could join our team," Jason said. "We'd all love to have you."

“I know. But while you have been going through all of the usual crazy stuff, Travis and I have been working on something.”

“Oh?”

Two chairs and a table formed from cloud material and an avatar brought out a tray of biscuits and tea as they sat down.

“You know that Travis has been spending a lot of time at the Temple of Knowledge?”

“I had a vague idea. Honestly, I haven’t kept as good a track of what Travis and Taika have been up to as I should. He’s found religion?”

“Not quite, although Knowledge certainly has an appeal for him. No, he’s been in discussions with the church about magitech, from Earth.”

“It is his specialty.”

“Knowledge doesn’t like people who don’t know what they’re talking about injecting new information to the world’s knowledge pool,” Farrah said. “Travis has been negotiating how much of his knowledge he’s allowed to start introducing here. How much he grasps with sufficient comprehension that it won’t cause problems when he starts teaching it. The goddess won’t let someone start spreading around concepts that are flat-out wrong. You do that in a completely new field of study and you’ll introduce falsehoods that might linger through centuries of subsequent research before they’re disproven.”

“That feels like it’s directed at me, but sure.”

“Why would that be directed at you?”

“I tried to tell Clive about gravity once. The goddess got a bit snippy. Or maybe that was Gabrielle. I don’t think she likes me.”

“When was this?”

“It was the day Emir arrived in Greenstone. Formally arrived anyway; I’d already met him. That would make it just before you died.”

“And Emir showed up early to meet you?”

“I think Rufus had been talking me up. Did I never tell you about any of this?”

“You’ve always been a bit reticent about the time around my death. And you weren’t recording a lot then either.”

“Right. Anyway, where do you come in on this business with Travis and Knowledge?”

“Do you remember how impressed I was with the grid on Earth?”

“Sure.”

“My world has similar warning systems, but they are far less elegant. They require much more upkeep and a higher level of magic. In low-magic areas like Greenstone, they don’t work at all.”

“But Earth is much lower-magic than Greenstone.”

“Exactly. And because magical formations are *my* specialty, I was able to learn vast amounts during my time on Earth. Not enough to replicate the grid, but I learned a lot of concepts that can revolutionise wide-area magical connections in this world.”

“So, you’re going to refurbish this world’s alarm systems?”

“That’s a part of it. A small part, really. The main thing I’m going to do is start a business with Travis.”

“A business?”

“Telecommunications. We’re going to take everything I know and everything he knows and magic up something like a mobile phone network. Less technology and more magic, but basically a phone network. We’re going to start with static connection points, like landlines, but transmitted over relay towers. It’s going to leave water-link communication in the dust.”

“The water link system does seem fairly limited.”

“Not to mention expensive and inconvenient. Now that the monster surge is winding down, we’re looking at a pilot program here in the Sea of Storms, as a proof of concept. We’re going to place towers in fortress towns so they don’t get taken down by roaming monsters.”

“Having reliable communication in the fortress towns would have saved a lot of lives during the surge.”

“Which is why the Sea of Storms government is backing the project.”

“The royal family?”

“No, the actual government administration. You know, Jason, the way you live your life is giving you a pretty skewed vision of the world.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re increasingly thinking like a gold-ranker. Maybe even a diamond-ranker.”

“How so?”

“If you wanted to get some help with something to do with government organisation, who would you go to for help?”

“I don’t know. Liara, maybe? Soramir, if it was important.”

“Jason, before this monster surge, Soramir was a near-mythical figure. And Liara is both a princess of the realm and one of the highest-ranking Adventure Society officials in the nation. Do you even know anyone lower rank than her?”

“Of course I do.”

“By name?”

“Sure, uh, yeah, Vidal. Vidal Ladiv. He came out to our boat to introduce us to surge protocols. And then he showed up right before the underwater complex thing? I forget why?”

“To debrief Sophie. She got ambushed on a contract.”

“They send people to talk to you about that? When I was ambushed, they didn’t debrief me.”

“Did they try only for you to tell them no in colourful fashion?”

“That does sound about right. But they were the ones who set me up to get ambushed, plus they watched the whole thing, so I don’t feel bad about it. But the point is, Vidal isn’t high rank at all.”

“Actually, he got promoted just before the underwater complex rescue, and then a huge promotion after.”

“Sure, but when we met him he was just some admin guy telling people about the monster surge protocols. He got a promotion, though? Good for him.”

“He showed a lot of leadership, apparently, and was a huge help once the flooding happened. Which I was wondering about, by the way. You had a belt that would help you handle underwater environments, right?”

“I did.”

“Then how is it that you got washed away from the team?”

“I couldn’t put it on in time.”

“Why didn’t you have it on already? Or have it on one of your outfit setups that your inventory does?”

“I know that I should have in hindsight, sure.”

“So, you have it on one of your outfit setups now?”

“Probably.”

“Probably?”

“I haven’t got around to it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I will.”

“It’s because the belt’s orange, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Bright orange, and you don’t want it to clash with your dramatic colour scheme.”

“It’s not because it’s orange.”

“I remember when we were gearing up for underwater action, and the shopkeeper had to get that belt from the back. Your face, when he came out with it, was aghast.”

“I was not aghast.”

“If the colour isn’t a problem, maybe you should wear it all the time? There’s a lot of water in the Sea of Storms.”

“I’m not wearing an ora— I’m not wearing an *extra* belt around everywhere.”

She grinned maliciously.

“Can we please stop talking about this?”

“You got in a fight with Sophie’s mum all alone because you didn’t want to wear an orange belt.”

“Can we go back to talking about you and Travis building a phone network? If it works out, everyone in the world is going to want in on that. The Magic Society will be all over you, either trying to take over or to stop you from interfering with their water-link profits. And it’s going to be a lot of work. Pallimustus doesn’t have the industrial hubs and manufacturing standardisation of Earth. It will take decades to spread this across the globe.”

“I’m silver rank; I have decades. There are plenty of people who don’t rush to gold rank, Jason. I’ll get there one day, but only self-improvement maniacs do it in ten years. Humphrey’s mother only just hit gold and she’s what? Fifty? Sixty? And she’s a famously active adventurer. Life has a way of finding things for you to do.”

“The things it finds for me tend to involve my needing to be as powerful as I can get, and it’s still never enough,” Jason said. “I guess I’ll have to be one of those maniacs.”

“You already are. Ever since you hit bronze, you’ve been going fast. The speed with which you hit silver, and then the silver wall, wasn’t record time, but it was faster than most. Comfortably.”

“We’ve had a lot to deal with.”

“Yeah,” Farrah said. “Jason, I know you have a lot of responsibilities. But you have other people to shoulder them with you now. You don’t need me. But if you want me to stay with you, you only have to ask.”

“No,” Jason said, shaking his head firmly. “You being there for me on Earth was more than I could ever ask for; I wouldn’t have made it through that time alone. I won’t be happy to not have you with me anymore, but I can see how excited you are by this.”

“Still, it feels a little like I’m leaving you in the lurch. I thought for a long time before I brought this up.”

“It makes sense. Gary’s a full-time smith now, and Rufus is a teacher. Your team is finding other pathways, outside of adventuring.”

“I’ve talked Rufus into staying with your team until you wind up back in Greenstone,” Farrah said. “He can help you refine your swordsmanship and get a proper handle on combat trances.”

“I will get back to Greenstone eventually,” Jason said. “But we plan to go very much the long way. I have a lot of world left to see.”

“Good. I think being a teacher will be good for him. You know how much he talks about his family running a school. But he’s got too much potential to *just* be a teacher. I want you to light a fire under him, while he’s with you. Remind him of what’s great about being an adventurer. Seeing the world and helping people. If he’s not the one in charge, maybe he’ll relax and not get so weighed down with responsibility.”

“You know, I’ve never actually seen him in action,” Jason said. “Not properly.”

“He’s a lot like you, in some ways. A lot of different pieces in his power set have to come together to make it work. It takes skill and judgement. Adapting them to different situations and setting up big finishers. You both get comprehensive use out of your power sets. The pair of you are,

rank-for-rank, some of the strongest combat adventurers I've seen."

"Well, he did teach me."

"And you learned. Ask some teachers about how often that *doesn't* happen."

The story continues in [BOOK NINE](#).

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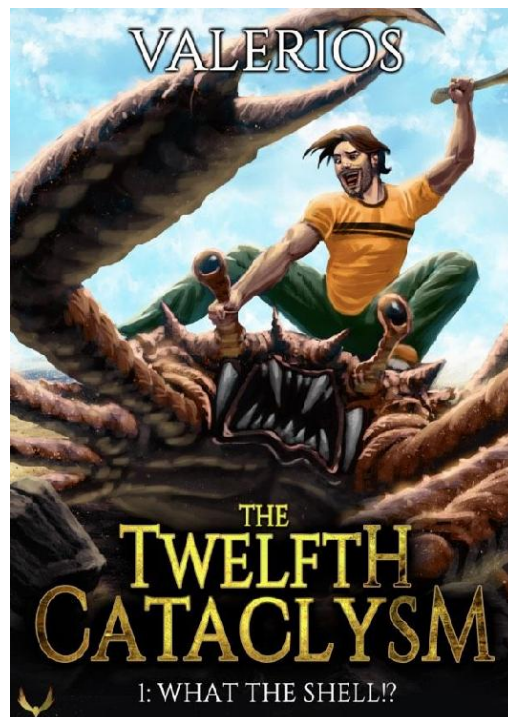
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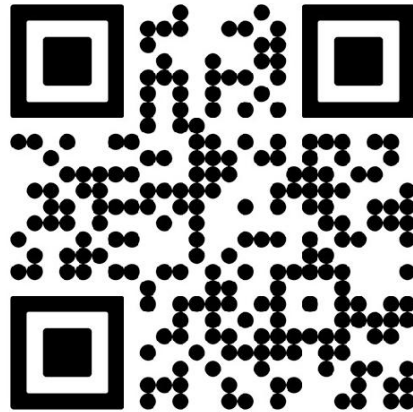
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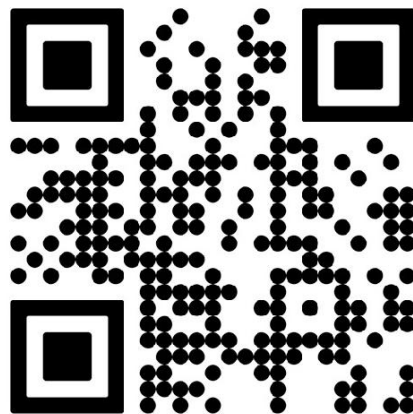
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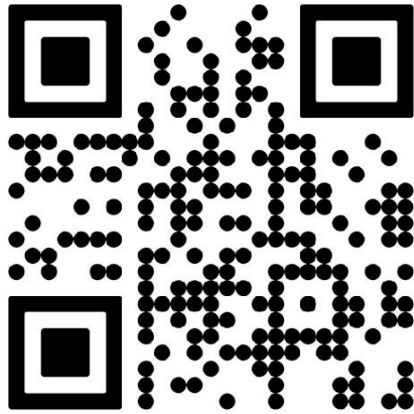
Melvin Murphy is your average everyday teen... until he finds the System.

Melvin has normal problems. High School. Tests. Trying to find a girlfriend (and failing... miserably). but one day he awakens with access to a System that governs all magic.

In his attempt to summon a teacher to show him the ropes, he botches the ritual and accidentally summons a magic-wielding girl named Kalliphae. Sure, she's powerful and deadly. A femme fatale who's more intimidating than even the most popular girls at school.

But she's FAR from a teacher. She's the same age as him and clueless about Earth. Can you say perfect team?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shirtaloon was working on a very boring academic paper when he realised that writing about an inter-dimensional kung fu wizard would be way more fun.

To discuss He Who Fights With Monsters and more, join Shirtaloon's [Discord!](#)