

## Chapter 97: Integrity is Sexy

With Dean and Jerrick stashed with Dean's family, Jason decided he had time to stop at his lodgings before getting to business. He was weary, heavy with the blood of the men he killed, even after the crystal wash had cleaned it away. He took a long, luxurious shower and, with a fresh change of clothes, went for lunch with Farrah, Gary and Rufus in their suite.

Madam Landry sent lunch up in the dumbwaiter and they went out to the balcony. Since Jason became an adventurer they were seeing less of each other, and eating lunch in the sunshine as they looked out over the ocean was something they did whenever they had the chance.

"You missed a lot," Farrah said to Jason as they sat down.

"Oh?"

"Gods showed up at Jory's clinic," Gary said. "It was something to see. Dominion asked after you by name."

"What?" Jason asked, half-standing in his chair. "Dominion as in the god?"

"That's the one," Farrah said.

"That's bad," Jason said, settling back down. "That's really bad."

"He seems to like you, if that helps," Farrah said.

"No, it does not help," Jason said. "That makes it worse."

The others recounted to Jason what took place outside the clinic.

"Good for Jory," Jason said. "He deserves recognition for what he does. And that Davone, guy. Turns out he's alright?"

"He's wasted following around that idiot, Thadwick," Rufus said.

"You should tell him about the other thing," Gary said to Rufus, who looked over at Farrah, who shook her head in resignation.

"Cowards," she said. "Jason, we're going away for a while. There's a big expedition, and we're on it."

"Oh?"

It finally came out why the Ustei Tribe came south. You remember that waterfall that shut off briefly, with monsters coming out?"

"Of course," Jason said.

"Well, there have been other instances around the desert. Close by, it's only been brief, isolated instances. Up north it looks like the problem is much worse. Enough that the oases connected to the astral space were no longer able to support all the nomad tribes."

"Something is going on with the astral space?" Jason asked.

"That's what we're going to find out," Rufus said, picking up the narrative. "We're going to relocate the Ustei back to the north, enter into one of the apertures and investigate the astral space."

"That doesn't sound like a small expedition," Jason said.

"It isn't," Rufus said. "It's massive. Danielle Geller is leading it, along with a handful of other silver rankers. Dozens of bronze-rankers, hundreds of iron. People who haven't been on a contract in years. The chance to explore the desert astral space, under the watchful protection of silver rankers? The city's most prominent families are falling over themselves to be involved."

"I can imagine," Jason said. "Why am I getting a sense of hesitation from you all?"

The others looked at each other, all shaking their heads. Finally, Gary groaned capitulation.

"You don't get to go," Gary said. "This isn't just a matter of you not being invited; you were specifically excluded. Which is a load of crap, if you ask me."

"Specifically excluded?" Jason said, his voice ramping up. The other braced for an explosion, but Jason let out a long, calming breath, instead.

"I guess I can see that," he said.

"You can?" Rufus asked, looking at Jason like he was a grenade that unexpectedly didn't explode.

"Look, it's no secret that I can be contentious when it comes to the upper-classes. I've caused problems before. And I've been rising up very high and very fast, socially, for someone with no background. I'm guessing this is a test. If I show that I can take this quietly, miss an opportunity without kicking up a stink, then I pass."

Jason turned his attention back to his meal as the others stared at him in silence.

"What?" he asked them.

"We kind of thought you'd have a bigger reaction," Farrah said.

"Making a noise in the face of authority is kind of a thing for you," Gary said.

"Yes, but I'm coming to realise it doesn't get me anywhere. The snake slithering across the lawn gets shot. The one waiting for the toddler to wander near the tall grass gets fed."

“That’s a horrifying analogy but welcomed, measured response,” Rufus said. “We might make a decent adventurer out of you yet.”

Jason frowned.

“Sometimes I wonder about that,” he said, his voice heavy. “I need your advice on how to handle something.”

“Of course,” Rufus said and they waited for Jason to speak. They showed concern at his uncharacteristic hesitation.

“I killed five adventurers today,” Jason said.

“What?” Gary asked immediately.

“Let him get it out,” Farrah told Gary.

“Yes,” Rufus said. “Start at the beginning.”

Jason nodded, absently.

“It started with this contract I took at the jobs hall...”

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Unlike the Geller family, whose seat of power was a sprawling estate in the delta, the Mercer’s main residence was a manor on the Island. A feat of magical engineering, it was a series of five towers set out in a ring. Built from a combination of the finest grade of green stone available and magic-wrought glass, each tower was five storeys tall, interconnected by a network of glass walkways. One set of the walkways was curved, linking the towers in a circle. Another set of walkways were straight, connecting every second tower in such a way that seen from above, it would form the shape of a pentagram.

Each of the walkways had a clear glass ceiling and colour-tinted glass floor, with a different colour for each walkway. The sides were open, but with invisible, magic barriers in place. The barriers let in fresh air while shielding from inclement weather, as rare as that was. It also prevented Mercer’s children and pets from running off the sides.

In the space between the towers was a park, with trees and lawns showered with colour as sunlight passed through the walkways above. In the centre of the park was a pond where waterfowl swam happily about. Children were playing as parents or family servants watched on. They ran around, climbed trees and tossed torn-up pieces of bread into the water to be gobbled-up by ducks.

Thalia Mercer was passing through one of the walkways when she felt a familiar aura from the park below. She moved to the side of the walkway to look down and then vanished, reappearing on the ground. She arrived next to a bench in the park where a man was eating a large sandwich.

“Jason,” she said, sitting down next to him. “Your ability to restrain your aura is quite developed for someone of your rank.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ve been working quite hard at it.”

“It shows.”

Jason placed his sandwich in his inventory, dabbed at his face with a napkin, then put it away as well.

“Lady Mercer,” he said, once he was done.

“I’ve told you, please call me Thalia. I’m afraid you’ve missed Cassandra; she’s out preparing for the big expedition.”

“Sadly, this isn’t a social visit,” Jason said. “I’m here about a contract.”

“I wasn’t informed of your arrival,” Thalia said. “Have you been using my household guard to practice your stealth techniques?”

“Your household guard only has a few bronze-rankers,” Jason said, “and they all seem to project their auras as imposingly as possible. Not that hard to avoid. I wouldn’t be able to get into the buildings unnoticed, though. Too many high-ranking Mercers in residence.”

“That’s the problem with having essence users as guards,” Thalia said. “Anyone with the skill to excel is unlikely to work as a guard, while anyone without essences can’t be an effective one.”

“I imagine you have a few quality staff nestled away,” Jason said. “I’ve recently been learning about the Mercer name’s ability to attract people into service.”

“Oh?”

“I assume you have a recording crystal projector we can use?”

“Of course,” she said. “Please follow me.”

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“Looks like I have to put both of you down,” Jerrick’s voice came out of the projection. Jason reached out and tapped the projector, bringing the playback to a stop. They were seated in Thalia’s personal study, a recording crystal projector on the table between them.

“After that is something of a mess,” he said. “A fight from my perspective makes for a disorienting recording. Lots of darkness and teleporting about. Suffice to say, I took the man into custody.”

“He’s alive?”

“Yes.”

“And this witness of yours?” Thalia asked.

“Also fine,” Jason said. “I didn’t want him mixing with his old crowd, so I sent him to stay with his family. They seemed quite happy to see him.”

“It can be that way, with the lower-end adventurers,” Thalia said. “A family can work for years, generations even, just to get an adventurer in the family. Adventuring is a dangerous life, though, and not everyone has the training, temperament or talent. Add on the family pressure and it’s hardly a surprise when many fall short. Some end up in the household guard of families like mine. Others end up working for criminals in Old City.”

“Or a bit of both, when they end up in your son’s employ.”

Thalia frowned.

“It seems we have been a little too loose with the reins when it comes to my son. His father wants to give him the room to come into himself, while I prefer a more guided approach. We raised Cassandra my way, and Thadwick his. Marriage is a matter of compromise, after all. This recording of yours lays my boy’s follies out on a slab.”

“I have another recording,” Jason said. “Has word got around about the dead adventurers in Old City yet?”

“From this morning?” Thalia asked. “Not widely, but yes. That was you?”

“Your son sent his lackeys to keep me from revealing everything. I have it all recorded. They don’t mention Thadwick at all, which I imagine was a point quite specifically made to them. If someone were to go round up the survivors, though, I doubt getting them to talk would be tricky. Especially with my corroborating witness from the recording you just saw.”

“Is he safe, this witness?” she asked.

“Safe enough,” Jason said, “So long as your son is prevented from taking revenge.”

Thalia sighed.

“That boy,” she muttered. “I think his father and I need to have a very long talk. What are your intentions?”

“For your son? Nothing. Regardless of what he’s done, I know you’ll protect him from anything within my power to do. I could kill him but I’d know I’d quickly follow him to the grave.

“Then you’re willing to forgive?”

“That’s asking a bit much. I’m willing to be patient. My desire to stay in your daughter’s good graces is a better shield than he could hope for. The most I can hurt him is to collect more than enough evidence to give your family a headache for which he is directly responsible. In addition to the recording you saw, I have copies of all the relevant

documents and another recording of finding them all. In case something mysteriously happens to the originals.”

“What inspired you to look into the hall of civic records?” Thalia asked.

“Where I come from, we don't investigate with magic,” Jason said. “When it comes to business fraud, you follow a paper trail. Once I heard about a monster known for death and destruction that keeps turning up without either, plus the highly-regulated and valuable nature of the lumber territories, it seemed obvious what was going on. All I had to do was figure out who stood to profit, then prove their involvement.”

“You must have needed help to find all that. I’m surprised that records official didn’t come to us. It’s widely known that we’ll double any bribe.”

“I didn’t offer a bribe,” Jason said. “I told her a story.”

“It must have been some story. You’re thorough, I’ll give you that. The question is, what will you do with all this information? Frankly, I’m surprised to find you here. I’ve had you looked into quite thoroughly, and everything I’ve heard suggests you would start shouting this information from the rooftops. You seem to have a dislike for aristocratic power structures.”

“I’m just some iron-ranker,” Jason said. “If I lay out an exploitative land-grab by your family, then all that does is demonstrate your power when you face no real repercussions. All you would suffer is the reputation hit of bumbling the affair to the point it went public. A headache, but one easily endured.”

“You may be underestimating the damage to our reputation,” Thalia said.

“Greenstone is a productive city, with decent work for those who want it. If our reputation suffers too much, then we have to start paying more or people will move into the service of other families. We may have power, but there’s always a balance.”

“Yes, but the scales are rigged.” Jason said. “Be that as it may, this won't start some populist revolution. I need to go up a few ranks before I can start changing the world. In the meantime, all I can do is go for the best outcome I can see.”

“Oh?”

“If I make a big fuss, then your family pushes back. I’ll suffer; the lumber mill owner, Lindover will suffer. Poor Dean, who I promised to shield from all this will definitely suffer. And when everything is said and done, you’d probably end up with the land, anyway.”

“You’re not exactly painting my family in a positive light,” Thalia said.

“You have power,” Jason said. “That’s the nature of power. So, for now, the best way to go is to see this quietly brushed under the rug.”

“And what do you want in return?”

“Here’s how I see it going,” Jason said. “I make a discreet report to the Adventure Society to close out the contract. Straight to the office of the director, to help keep a lid on the details. Your family compensates Lindover for the months of stalled production, and all the preparations Clementson made in preparation for a takeover get rolled back. Dean doesn’t suffer any blowback for having come clean and Jerrick is quietly struck off the Adventure Society roll.”

“You don’t want him punished for trying to kill you?”

“If he were put on trial for trying to kill me, the reason why would be an inevitable question. Also, I’m not the kind of person that kills the minion when he can’t kill the master. Losing his Society membership is enough.”

“What about the men you killed this morning?”

“The ones I killed already had their chance,” Jason said with flint in his voice. “I let most of them go.”

“Most of them? You killed five; how many people did you fight?”

“Elspeth Arella will have the recording. I imagine she’ll show you when she’s leveraging your family.”

Thalia gave a wry smile.

“I daresay you’re right. So, you’re willing to leave Thadwick to my family?”

“We both know he’s out of my reach,” Jason said. “But regardless of how powerful your family is, and my affection for your daughter, there is only so far I’m willing to be pushed. I’m running out of mercy for your son.”

“You know, my husband won’t be happy about this outcome. He’s been waiting to see some initiative from Thadwick.”

“Then he should wait to see some morals,” Jason said, his expression turning hard.

“He won’t like compensating the mill owner, either.”

“He doesn’t have to like it,” Jason said. “He just has to do it.”

“I thought the whole point of you taking this approach was to avoid provoking us?”

“And you need to recognise that I’m not a doormat you can just walk over. I have my bottom line, Lady Mercer. You would do well not to cross it.”

“Is that a threat?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

She smiled.

“Mr Asano, you have some backing, but you are ultimately an iron-ranker lost in a world he does not know.”

Thalia’s silver-rank aura pressed down on Jason.

"You pose no threat whatsoever to me or my family," she told him.

"I imagine a thought very much like that was one of the last to pass through Cressida Vane's head before it was smashed open."

Thalia laughed, breaking the tension.

"You really don't flinch, do you? My daughter certainly knows how to pick them. Alright, Jason. Lindover will be duly compensated and Thadwick will be suitably chastised. I'll see to it my husband doesn't kick up too much of a fuss. He dotes on Cassie, and her approval of you will go a long way."

"In my world, fathers often don't care for their daughters' gentlemen friends."

"The gods know my husband has his failings," Thalia said, "but a failure to trust his daughter's judgement isn't one of them."

They stood up.

"Very well," Jason said. "I imagine you'll be pushing all this onto Clementson? Making out that he was behind everything as a way to ingratiate himself with his aristocratic backers?"

"Are you alright with that?" she asked.

"The man was clearly complicit, and fetched one of your son's lackeys to kill me, so yes. Don't be too harsh on him, though. Not many can say no when the Mercers tell them what to do."

"You make us sound like tyrants," Thalia said.

"That's the thing," Jason said. "You are if you want to be."

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Jason was sitting on a bench in the park district, speaking into a recording crystal floating in front of him.

"...it was sort of a business fraud kind of deal. There was a lot of waiting around, but it gave me a chance to catch up on my reading. I was stuck at this abandoned lumber mill for three days with a guy named Kyle. Nice enough bloke, but really only likes to talk about wood. I suspect he's very good at his job, but not much of a conversationalist. My friends Farrah and Clive, I'm sure you've seen them on some of these recordings, they've been foisting a lot of magical theory texts on me, so I was able to get stuck into those. It's pretty fascinating, but I can't tell them that. They're rabid enough as it is."

"Hello, handsome," a sultry voice came from behind. Jason grinned as Cassandra sidled onto the bench, leaning into him.

"Is this one of the recordings you're making for your family back home?" she asked, looking at the crystal.



"It is," Jason said. "Family, this is Cassandra. We've been seeing each other socially."

"Is that how you describe it?" Cassandra asked cheekily.

"That's how I describe it to my mum," Jason said, taking down the recording crystal.

"Well, you impressed my mother," Cassandra said. "Dad, not so much. And I'd watch my back around Thadwick."

"One of his henchmen tried to kill me, so yeah, I'll be watching out. What about you?"

"Mother said you barely mentioned me," she said with a pout.

"I can't go around making decisions based on dark, gorgeous eyes," he said.

"Besides; integrity is sexy."

He reached out for her hand as they sat side-by-side, intertwining their fingers.

"You'll be away for a little while," he said.

"I don't like that you're not coming," she said. "We could have had a fun little trip away."

"We can do that when you come back," Jason said. "I assume your family owns an obnoxiously large boat. We could have a little sailing trip. A picnic basket, some wine... a small army of nautically adept servants."

She laughed, resting a head on his shoulder.

"Something to look forward to," she said.

"You can tell me all about your exciting adventures in the astral space."

"Deal," she said. "Maybe you should round out your awakening stones while we're gone," she said. "take the chance to blitz some one-star contracts, get moving towards bronze. You have to get there before I hit silver, you know."

"My friends told me not to do that," Jason said. "It seems there might be an unusual opportunity not long after they get back."

"Oh?" she prompted.

"They're still not giving me any details," Jason said. "It's something to do with why they came here in the first place. They're expecting another adventurer to arrive. A gold-ranker, apparently."

"I've heard rumblings about that. Maybe you should catch that thief giving everyone so much trouble. My uncle and the Adventure Society director have been quite contentious about it, behind the scenes."

"The whole thing seems sketchy to me," Jason said. "High-profile jobs; the Duke and Elspeth Arella taking such an interest. The whole thing smells of politics."

"You know, she was almost caught a few days ago. A group of adventurers almost pinned her down, but they were attacked."

“By who?”

“No one knows,” Cassandra said. “They just slowed them down for long enough for her to escape, then fled themselves. Dressed all in black. They weren’t even iron-rankers.”

“I told you,” Jason said. “Politics. There’s a mess of undercurrents running through the whole business.”

“You don’t want to catch her?”

“She’s robbing from rich people,” Jason said. “I can appreciate that.”

“Aren’t you rich?”

“Not compared to you.”