

Chapter 265

A Time For Parting

When Isabella Pantero heard the bell on the door to her bakery jingle, she came from out back to behind the glass counter.

“Mr Asano!” she exclaimed. “I was told that you died!”

He looked quite unlike his usual self, the confident grin replaced with a furtive expression dominated by a bushy moustache. She knew he had gone away on some kind of adventurer business, hearing just recently that he failed to return alive.

“Coming back from the dead is kind of my thing,” Asano said. “I want biscuits, please.”

“I’m glad to see you made it back after all, Mr Asano. What kind of biscuits, and how many?”

Asano reached into his pockets, grabbing handfuls of loose objects that he dropped onto the countertop. There were spirit coins, iron, bronze and even silver. Mostly it was roughly coin-shaped objects, like buttons, and flat, round stones.

“I have this many monies,” Asano said.

“Are you alright, Mr Asano?”

“Biscuits!”

Isabella sorted through the assembled debris on the countertop. The inclusion of a pair of silver-rank coins alone was sufficient to empty out the store and then some.

“Mr Asano, this is far more than enough for all the biscuits we have.”

Asano’s face lit up. Soon after, he was navigating his way out of the store with multiple bags clutched in each hand.

“Mr Asano, what about the rest of your money?” Isabella called out as he awkwardly navigated the door.

“Thank you, nice lady!” Asano responded, stepping outside. “I got them!”

He hurried out of sight, only to pass in front of the glass storefront moments later, riding what appeared to be a flying tortoise. As she cleared the coins and other objects from the counter, she considered it to be at least the third strangest encounter she had with the eccentric customer.

“He’s acting out,” Humphrey said. “He misses Jason too.”

“That’s no excuse to wear Jason’s face,” Sophie snarled. “Does he not understand what it does to us to see it?”

“No, Sophie, he doesn’t,” Humphrey explained calmly. “He’s smarter since ranking up, but he’s still a child, with a child’s mind.”

“You need to make him understand,” she said.

“Maybe you could do that,” Humphrey suggested. “I know talking about your feelings isn’t really your thing, but maybe you can share with him. It might help him to understand.”

They were making their way through the trade hall toward Gilbert Bertinelli’s shop. Under normal circumstances, Gilbert dealt exclusively in menswear. He had made an exception in the case of modifying Sophie’s armour, which had originally been made by another craftsperson on Gilbert’s recommendation.

Gilbert had undergone a significant transformation during their time away, now that he was a full-blown essence user. His hair had filled out, while his physique went from plump and visibly squishy to firmly barrel-chested. He looked ten years younger, finally showing some resemblance to his silver-ranked brother, Bertram.

“Here we are,” Gilbert said, presenting the modified armour to Sophie and Humphrey. “I’ve incorporated the hydra leather and significantly enhanced the self-repair aspect of the enchantment. The critical areas still have hard-panel protection, but those sections won’t self-repair as quickly as the softer armour.”

“That’s fine,” Sophie said. The armour looked closer to what Jason’s had, with increased areas of dark grey amongst the black, although her version was still more form-fitting than his combat robes.

“Unfortunately,” Gilbert continued, “enhancing the self-repair came at the cost of diminishing other effects, such as the poison resistance. It does now slightly enhance self-healing effects, however, so I believe you’ll find it a worthwhile exchange. To be honest, I was somewhat worried about the modifications, but I’m rather satisfied with the result.”

“So am I,” Sophie said, then asked about the price. Gilbert was adamant in refusal of any money.

“I’ve heard what you all did. Not the details, of course – I’m not that well connected – but I know you saved us all from something terrible. Consider this a last service for Mr Asano. He truly was my favourite customer.”

“That’s nice of you to say,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, I’m not just saying, it, Young Master Geller; he genuinely was. He always knew what he needed, yet was flexible in how those needs were met. Firm, as necessary, yet open to suggestion. He was personable, patient, courteous and gracious. He appreciated salesmanship and was a source of wondrous materials. And, of course, was always willing

to spend what it took to meet his needs. No offence, Young Master Geller, but he was most likely the best customer I'll ever have."

Gilbert gave an awkward smile, having said more than he intended. "I apologise, sir and madam, I've overstepped my..."

Both Gilbert and Humphrey were startled when Sophie embraced Gilbert in a hug, throwing her arms around his barrel chest. He somewhat awkwardly patted her on the back.

Two men sat in a café, just off Greenstone's divine square. Both wore the robes of clergymen for the church of the Healer. One was Neil, who had long been a churchman. The church of the healer, like most faiths, made little call on the time of adventuring clergy with a lot of potential. The benefits of having high-ranking members outweighed the need to keep low-ranking essence users under their thumb. It was a widespread, but not universal approach, with the church of Dominion being the most prominent outlier.

The other man was much newer to the cloth. He had been working with the church of the Healer for more than a year, first at his clinic, then more directly in the last couple of months. Having grown up in an area where the local Healer church was so corrupt, travelling around and seeing the church's work elsewhere had been a revelation. Watching the church's dedication to helping people had compelled him to join their ranks.

"My understanding," Neil said to Jory, "is that your low-cost potions are predicated on local ingredients. Does that make them of limited use, elsewhere? Especially given the rather specific nature of the delta's environment."

"It was never my potion recipes the church was after," Jory explained. "It's my research methodologies. If it was just about recipes, then the church would be better-off leaving me here to cook up as many potions as I could. The reality has been exactly the opposite; I've done very little hands-on alchemy lately."

He paused to sip at his tea.

"It's all lectures," Jory continued. "Teaching people how to replicate my results by researching their own local ingredients."

"And that's been working?"

"It's still quite early into the program," Jory said. "It took me years before I started seeing results. The idea is for others to do what I did, just faster, with the benefits of what I learned along the way."

"But you think people can do it?"

“Flexibility is the key,” Jory said. “You have to develop your recipes in accordance with the ingredients you can get a lot of for cheap. That’s the only real lesson, because most alchemists take the opposite approach. They start with the recipe they want and try to make the ingredients do that. Ultimately, I’m not trying to impart a skill, but a perspective.”

“But what if the local ingredients aren’t any good for making cheap healing and mana potions? Those are what people are after, right? Especially with the spreading conflict with the Builder cult. It’s hard to imagine how the prick managed to recruit so many of them.”

“Distribution is the other aspect of the church’s program. I lucked out, with the natural affinities of the delta’s magic, which is what inspired me to explore this as a field of alchemy. Not everyone has that good fortune; they have to make what they can make. That’s where the church comes in establishing a distribution network of cheap alchemy products. Whatever you people make will be useful to someone. As long as you have sufficiently robust distribution, you can trade what you have for what you need.”

“And the church is playing middleman?”

“The god of trade is working with us, so we don’t encroach on their territory with what will hopefully be a huge undertaking. The idea is to prevent the kind of gouging that relying on the usual mercantile system would inevitably draw and prevent the whole system from getting bogged down by cartels.”

“And the Trade god is alright with that?”

“We struck a deal. The essentials, like healing items, are going to be shipped at cost. The rest will have small margins, so as not to mess it all up, but the volume should still make it worthwhile.”

“I hope you aren’t trying to recruit me into joining your administrative team.”

“Definitely not,” Jory said with a chuckle. “For that kind of work, solid logisticians and administrators are more valuable than essence users. The church has high hopes for you. They want you to get up to silver, even gold, so you can really promote the church’s interests.”

Jory’s expression turned sombre.

“In the days to come,” he said, “we’re going to need you on the front lines.”

“Front lines?” Neil asked, sitting up sharply. “Are you talking about war?”

“Haven’t you already been to battle?” Jory asked. “The Builder cult may be done here in Greenstone, but we’re a small part of a big world. I’ve also been hearing rumbling from the Council of Faiths. There are rumours that the other gods will declare Purity a fallen god.”

“What would that even entail?” Neil asked.

“I don’t have any reliable information on that front,” Jory said. “From what I’ve heard, it involves the other gods sanctioning Purity, whatever that means. Suppressing the church, somehow. I think the idea is that the existing clergy are meant to step away from the church, while any who refuse to are... dealt with.”

“That sounds ominous,” Neil said.

“Yep,” Jory agreed. “I’ve only heard this ‘sanction’ the gods are looking at in vague terms, but it sounds as bad, or worse. I think the idea is that the god of Purity either gets brought into line or somehow replaced, after which the clergy who stepped away from the old church can return to the new one.”

“That sounds way above our level,” Neil said.

“Good thing Jason isn’t around to stick his head right in the middle.”

“Oh gods, he would too,” Neil said with a wincing chortle. “He’d run around, firing his mouth off and making trouble. Mostly for us.”

The pair shared a sad smile.

“I’m sorry we won’t get to see it,” Jory said.

“Of course you are,” Neil said. “You’re not on his team.”

Then Neil’s expression fell, his gaze moving down to his hands, speaking his next words softly.

“You weren’t the one responsible for keeping him alive.”

In the morning, Jason’s team would be parting ways, if only temporarily, to go off on varying assignments. Clive and Belinda would be working with the Magic Society, while Sophie, Humphrey and Neil were going with Emir.

The farewell gathering was held in one of the sprawling bar-lounges in Emir’s cloud palace, the largest collection of Jason’s friends since his memorial service, more than a month earlier. There were a few notable absences; people who had left Greenstone and only returned briefly for the memorial.

Prince Valdis had portalled in for the service, but was once again back in the Mirror Kingdom, where they had their own battles with the Builder cult. Gary had retired from adventuring after Jason and his team’s departure, returning to his home and becoming a full-time weaponsmith. He had also been portalled in for the memorial but had departed immediately after.

Rufus was unsure when his big friend would return to the adventuring life, if ever. Rufus' team had vanished around him and he was left feeling adrift. He had thrown himself into developing the training annex project, giving him some much-needed purpose.

Jason's team had laid claim to a cluster of seats around a low table, with Jory sharing his plush cloud chair with Belinda.

"You aren't worried about Clive luring away your lady with the sexually-charged lifestyle of the research academic?" Neil asked Jory.

"Nope," Jory said confidently. The kiss on the cheek he received as a reward left a big grin on his face.

Next to them, Sophie was sitting with puppy Stash on her lap, absently scratching him behind the ears. As had been the case since waking up to find that Jason had died covering their escape, her expression shifted between unreadably blank and a dour veneer pasted over a rage that had no place to go. Humphrey, looking at her with concern, picked up his glass the from the table in between them and held it up.

"Without Jason Asano," he said, "we wouldn't all be here. He didn't care what my name was or who my family were. He became a true friend, which was always hard for me. And he led me to finding many more."

Neil picked up his own glass and raised it.

"He became a friend to me, even though I hated his smug face," he said, getting a laugh.

"I never much thought I needed friends," Clive said, raising his glass. "Jason taught me that I was wrong as he reawakened a passion for adventuring I thought was long dead."

"I watched Jason come in day after day and heal people no one else cared about," Jory said.

"Except you," Belinda said.

"The day I met Jason," Jory continued, "he had the crap kicked out of him by a couple of priests of the healer. Which he completely brought on himself, just to be clear. Afterwards, he grinned at me and said he'd rather be the guy that got his butt kicked than the guy who didn't. I knew that I'd never go as far as he did, but he helped me to realise that some things are worth the price we pay. He went and died, proving it, sending my most precious person back to me."

"Jason saved Sophie and me when we needed it most," Belinda. "He gave us new lives. You all helped us, but without him, you either wouldn't or couldn't. I don't blame

anyone for that. Who would go so far for strangers, for no better reason than we needed him to? And possibly because Sophie looks like that. She makes guys go a bit funny.”

The group laughed again, except for Sophie.

“Jason saved some of us at the beginning,” Sophie said. “He saved all of us and more at the end. Everyone in this city. If I had the choice, I’d bring him back and let the city burn; I don’t think they’re worth his life.”

Everyone looked awkward, not knowing what to say. Sophie raised her glass to join the others.

“But he did,” Sophie said, her sombre voice getting lighter. “So I’m going to try live the life he saved, in the way he’d want me to live it.”

The others gave her bittersweet smiles and nodded as they clinked their glasses together.

“To Jason Asano,” Humphrey toasted.