

## Chapter 623

### Fighting the Power

Korinne glowered, complaining.

“This is a bunch of lizard shi—”

“We took a vote,” Rosa said, cutting off her latest complaint. “You’re the team leader, Korinne, not the team queen.”

“I don’t feel like the leader when you all mutiny like this.”

“We didn’t mutiny, Korinne. We just bought a vehicle that we actually want to live in.”

They were riding out of the city in a House de Varco designed Outpost Rover. It was a vehicle model that the very happy salesman described as the premier choice for the adventuring team that looking to travel in spacious luxury. What he meant was the choice for the adventuring team that could afford it.

While unquestionably comfortable for six, it was no pleasure barge, as Rosa and Kalif kept pointing out to Korinne. It had powerful defensive measures to withstand monster attacks, features designed to facilitate training and even a prison cell that could be expanded externally to the vehicle to contain a relatively large monster of up to silver rank.

Due to the impressive size of the vehicle, which would match that of the Carlos Crime Wagon, they took the salesman’s advice and obtained the required temporary permits to fly it out of the city. That came at a further and considerable expense, but was worth it to avoid having to navigate the massive vehicle through the streets, let alone the gummed-up traffic around the city gates.

The entire endeavour was extremely expensive, but this was a team of silver rank guild elites, fresh off a monster surge. They were a long way from the only adventurers making hefty investments in their future. Successful teams often took the approach of using their success during a monster surge to set up their next decade of adventuring until the next one.

The Adventure Society bonus system rewarded those who stepped up during the surge, and Korinne's team had very much done that. With the monster surge lasting five or six times longer than normal, the rewards for active adventurers had climbed to never-before-seen heights. Fortunately, the massive number of monsters meant more loot than ever before from which to distribute those awards. Adventure Society loot teams were always deployed as part of after-action teams, cleaning up after adventurers without loot powers themselves.

Jason's team had done fairly well in terms of bonuses, although Jason himself was a bit of an oddity. While he did have some outrageous contributions, he also had lengthy dead periods where he was doing nothing but recovering. In the end, he'd been given a special assessment, which he used to claim some useful quintessence to feed into the cloud flask.

The convoy remained at Rajoras for a few days as the new vehicle was customised and a certain submarine was discreetly broken down into parts and brought to Jason, who fed them into the cloud flask. Jason never went into the city himself, although he debated it during the breaks in the rain. It wasn't likely he'd be recognised, but it was still the playground of House de Varco, so he decided to remain on the yacht until they were further from Rimaros.

The three-vehicle convoy had become four as Korinne's team eschewed the yacht for their own vehicle. They left Rajoras not by road but upriver, joining the water traffic on the way to their next destination. The short term plan was to follow the river that followed a valley just inland of the east coast, moving out of the Storm Kingdom's territory. Eventually, they would leave the river to head for the coast proper.

Jason and his companions were gathered in a briefing room on the yacht, along with Carlos, Arabelle and most of Korinne's team. Only Kalif had been left behind, to drive their new vehicle. He was starting to get a handle on it, and had run it into very few other vehicles on the river all day.

Humphrey was going over the convoy's immediate plans, with a map behind him showing their river route and intended path east. Korinne was standing beside him. Humphrey used a thin rod to indicate their disembarkation point from the river.

"We'll be landing here," he said. "Prior to the monster surge, this was the location of the river city of Cartise. Unfortunately, the Builder cult managed to claim a nearby astral space, causing widespread destruction as the astral space separated from our world. When a diamond-rank monster manifested shortly after, the city was overwhelmed."

"Most of the population was evacuated to the large towns nearby and along the river," Korinne said, picking up the narrative. "But Cartise was the major hub in this area for trade and travel. Its absence increases the logistical strain on surrounding centres as they start rebuilding after the surge."

"Especially now that they have overpopulation issues with the Cartise refugees," Humphrey added.

"In short," Korinne said, "we're saying that there is a lot of adventuring work. The surge may be over, but that doesn't mean our jobs are done. While the monster numbers

won't be as high, the problems will become increasingly about logistics. Securing supply routes, escorting specialists rebuilding infrastructure. Utility powers will be increasingly at a premium, with storage and portal powers both in high demand. It may not be glamorous work, but it's essential. People need our help just as much now as they did a month ago; it's just not about constantly killing monsters anymore."

"We're from one of the best guilds in the world," complained Polix, from Korinne's team. "You want us doing delivery runs and escorting craftspeople? That's trash adventurer work."

"Trash adventurers," Korinne said, "are defined by their attitudes, not their combat ability. Our duty as adventurers is to do what people need, not what we want."

"Exactly," Rosa agreed. "Don't be a turd, Polix."

Jason felt old as he watched Korinne's team bicker briefly amongst themselves. Like Humphrey and Neil, they were roughly the same age now as he had been when he first arrived in Pallimustus, but he wondered if he'd ever been that much of a young little prick. He thought back for a moment and then shook his head. He'd been worse.

"We've moved out of the high-magic Sea of Storms, so gold rankers will be a lot less common," Humphrey said, continuing the briefing. "As silver rankers, it falls to us to step up and not just do our duty as adventurers, but to set an example. With our behaviour."

Korinne's team looked sheepish. They were each from major adventuring families in Rimaros, and had been lectured their whole lives about the standards they were meant to set. But most of their adventuring careers had been under strict supervision, where they were never expected to represent adventuring as a whole to the public. They were now heading into exactly the kind of experience this self-directed tour was designed to give them.

After the briefing, Humphrey found Jason and they headed in the direction of Jason's cabin as they talked.

"Thank you for expanding the cabin sizes," Humphrey said.

"Well, with team Rain Chopper—"

"Storm Shredder," Humphrey corrected.

"With team Wet Stabber moving into their new ride, there was room to expand."

"How would you like it if people were deliberately getting our team name wrong?" Humphrey asked.

"I'm fine with that. What would they go with, though? Team Scone? Ooh, that's not bad. Maybe we should formally change the name to Team Scone."

"We are not changing it to Team Scone!"

“See, I knew you’d come to love Team Biscuit.”

“We should change it to something sensible.”

“You mean like team Damp Jabber?”

“Storm Shredder.”

“What would we go with, using that name as a model.”

“I don’t mean to copy their name.”

“Team Moist Crevice? Seems a bit risqué.”

“I get it,” Humphrey surrendered. “We’re sticking with Team Biscuit.”

“Hey Shade,” Jason said. “Tell the others that Humphrey is talking about changing the team name again.”

“Please don’t.”

“Tell them he wants to go with team Moist Crevice.”

“Shade,” Humphrey said, “please do not do that.”

“Mt Geller, I am afraid that I am but humble familiar, bound to my summoner’s commands.”

“You should tell that to Stash,” Humphrey grumbled.

“Hey, since I’m changing up the cabins,” Jason said to Humphrey, “did you want me to merge yours and Sophie’s instead of adjoined cabins with a connecting door?”

“No, Sophie values having her own space and time to be alone. Also, if she and Belinda don’t get enough private time together, Lindy starts giving me looks that worry me a great deal. Farrah’s started joining them as well. I’m beginning to suspect they talk about me in there.”

“Beginning to suspect? Mate, they’re definitely talk about you.”

“You’ve been listening in?”

Jason put a comforting hand on Humphrey's shoulder as they arrived at Jason's cabin.

“I don’t have to, mate. They just are.”

The cloud door disappeared to grant them entry. Humphrey moved to sit in an armchair while Jason moved to a cooling container.

“Can I talk you into a refreshing fruit drink?” he asked.

“Please,” Humphrey said. “This endless rain and heavy air is worse than back home.”

“The delta is a geographical oddity, because of an astral space spewing out water,” Jason said. “It’s got the heat and the humidity, but it’s too far south for a monsoon season.”

“You know a lot about the natural world,” Humphrey said as Jason started preparing fruit for juicing. “You know a lot in general.”

“Those statements are both false,” Jason said. “Especially here, where magic changes rules. Back on Earth as well, now it has magic too.”

“I think it’s a matter of perspective,” Humphrey said. “I suspect your education system is much better than ours. The Church of Knowledge does what it can, but they get a lot of pushback. At the risk of supporting your thoughts on aristocracy as a system, a lot of the nobility is resistant to widespread education beyond the reading and writing programs the church managed to make standard.”

“Honestly, my home culture isn’t any better. My education was good because we had money.”

“Wait, after all the complaining you had about nobility this and nobility that, your way isn’t any better?”

“Yeah, well... you didn’t come up here to discuss school funding disproportionately being funnelled into private schools.”

Jason used a pair of magic wands to juice the fruit and put it in a pitcher before taking it over to Humphrey on a tray with some tall glasses containing ice cubes. They sat in armchairs facing one another, with the drinks on a table between them.

“It’s about what we were talking about in the briefing,” Humphrey said. “Setting an example. And also, perspective.”

“Oh?” Jason prompted as he poured drinks.

“Jason, your perspective is extremely skewed. In Greenstone, you were an iron ranker regularly dealing with silver and even gold rankers. That isn’t normal. Then you went to Earth, where things were even more disproportional, if my discussions with Farrah are anything to go by.”

“You’ve been talking with Farrah about my time on Earth?”

“Taika and Travis, as well. We all realised that talking about it with you wasn’t a good idea,” Humphrey said. “We left that to Arabelle. When we first arrived in Rimaros, you were an open wound, Jason.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jason conceded. “And yes, I wasn’t exactly a face in the crowd.”

“Then you arrive in the Sea of Storms and suddenly it’s princesses everywhere, diamond rankers and whatever Dawn is.”

“She’s diamond rank. Technically. I’m still not entirely clear of what half-transcendent means.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Humphrey said. “My mother has indicated enough times that there are things about gold rank that I don’t know, let alone diamond. Diamond rankers are more legend than reality in low-magic zones like Greenstone.”

“What’s the point you’re meandering around?” Jason asked.

“Jason, you’ve been conditioned to interact with the world in a certain way. You’re used to the people around you being far more powerful, and needing to be more than a little outrageous for them to take notice. You’ve always had to make bold moves so you weren’t dismissed out of hand.”

“But?”

“But now you’ll be meeting a lot more people to whom you are the powerful one. If you run around doing outrageous things when you’re the one with all the power, that’s not bold; it’s maniacal. These aren’t people you need to go all out with. If you treat them like you did Elspeth Arella or Vesper Rimaros, you’re going to turn their worlds upside down. To ordinary people, an unhinged silver-rank adventurer is far worse than a silver-rank monster.”

“Unhinged?”

“Jason, most of the people in this world are just ordinary folk, going about their lives. Silver-rank adventurers coming in and acting wild have all the power and destructiveness of a hurricane. In the places we’ll be going from now on, you won’t be fighting the power anymore. You’ll be the power.”

“You know that I was always good at interacting with normal people back in Greenstone.”

“And are you the same person you were back then?”

Jason grimly nodded, conceding the point. He looked thoughtful as he sipped at his drink.

“I suppose I’m not,” he said. “Since then it’s been a series of increasingly powerful people trying to yank me one way or the other, and I’ve become more and more extreme to face that. Now that you say it, I’m not sure I know how to be anything else anymore. But now I’m the powerful one, so I’ve become the thing I was always struggling against. You may be right that I don’t know how to handle that.”

“Yes. It’s hard to see what’s happening to you when you’re dealing with Soramir Rimaros or you’re the most famous essence user in the world. But you’re probably stronger than anyone who was in Greenstone back then. Except for Thalia Mercer and my mother, but they weren’t really Greenstone residents. They were just back for the monster surge that kept not coming. At least now we know why.”

Jason frowned and took another sip of his drink.

“I’m not sure what to do about that. How to deal with regular people. I never wanted to be that guy so removed from regular people that he becomes detached from ordinary life.”

“Maybe think of this as a chance to reconnect with that. I’m just warning you to be mindful of the power you wield, and the fact that many people don’t.”

Jason nodded.

“Thanks, Humphrey. I appreciate you looking out for me.”

“Of course.”

“No, I mean it. You’ve helped me get over a huge hump in my mindset.”

“Please don’t.”

“It’s just good to know that I can rely on the team, instead of humping this issue alone.”

“Just stop.”

“The same goes for you. You don’t have to hump the burden of looking out for me by yourself.”

“You are my least favourite team member.”