

Chapter 910

That's What Adventurers Do

With the impending arrival of a literal shipload of gold rankers, things had been busy for the senior officials of the Greenstone Adventure Society branch. Everything about Vincent Trenslow was drooping except for his immaculate moustache, poking stiffly out from each side of his face. He was going through a list of requests from local nobility who, sadly, held enough influence that he couldn't just dump the whole stack of papers in the bin. He looked up at a knock on his office door, grateful for any reprieve.

"Sir?" his assistant Gretchen said after poking her head in. "We've had bit of an odd report from the jobs hall."

"Odd how?"

She opened the door properly and moved into the office.

"It's about adventure boards in the delta. Someone has been marking off contracts as complete, but none of them have been turned in at the hall."

"How many contracts?"

"As far as we can tell... all of them. In about a day and a half. A few adventurers came back from the delta and reported that every village had the adventure board marked as complete. We've sent people confirm, and the monsters are gone in every instance we've checked."

"I assume some of the delta residents had some light to shed. Surely someone saw whoever was responsible."

"Yes, sir. Some reported a stranger who did some healing and, in one case, briefly operated some kind of food kiosk at a lumber camp."

Vincent leaned back in his chair and let out a long, slow breath.

"You know what this is, sir?"

"I do," he said wearily. "Tell the jobs hall to mark the contracts as closed, no reward claimed."

"Is this about the gold rankers?"

"No, and that's an order. The official position of the Adventure Society is that there are no gold rankers operating in the city or its surrounds until they arrive here by ship the day after tomorrow. Do not let me hear you have been so much as implying anything else, Gretchen."

"Is it that big a deal, sir?"

Vincent sighed.

“Dear gods, I hope not.”

Hiram had been climbing the mountain trail most days, for most of his life. Age had been catching up to him, but his limbs carried him now with fresh vigour, courtesy of his bronze rank physique. He had told his granddaughter not to waste the hard-fought earnings of an adventurer on an old man and she, of course, had ignored him.

He'd saved and scrimped from before she was even born to give her the opportunity. More than giving him his own chance to become an essence user, she repaid him with the joy in her eyes when she came home and told him the story of her adventures.

He looked up at the water roaring out from a hole in the side of the mountain. The torrent became deafening as he ascended towards the tunnel that would lead him inside. It was even louder in the cave, echoes thundering like the bellow of some primordial beast. The air in the cave was wet, leaving the boards of the wooden walkway slick, thus the grit adhered to the planks for grip. It was getting on time to replace some of the boards and apply fresh grit to the others.

The cave was still beautiful to his eyes, even after all these years. Glow stone lamps lit up the green stone. At the end of the cave was a cavern where the torrent passed through on its way out of the mountain. It was travelling so fast it moved horizontally through the air, a fast-moving wall of water. Blue light shone from it and spray became a sparkling mist that filled the cavern.

Hiram shook his head with a chuckle, remembering when he'd been caught in the water, carried down the tunnel and shot out into the air. He'd been certain he was going to die, and instead ended up with one of the precious essences he was able to gift his granddaughter.

The half of the cavern that didn't have water rushing through it had been carved to a flat surface, with a metal safety rail to keep anyone from getting too close to the water. It was a lot stronger than it once had been, after the incident. Attached to the cavern was a room carved into the wall, with a large window and a door for access.

Made to keep monitoring staff warm and dry, the room was larger and more comfortable than it had been when Hiram was a young man. He'd thought the job would tide him over until he found something better, and he never did. It was an easy job, monitoring the water aperture, so long as you didn't mind climbing the mountain every day.

Hiram headed for the booth to relieve Dave, who was bit of an odd sort. Didn't much care for people, or for daylight, but was friendly enough if you left him to himself. He did

get cranky for a bit after Martha's boy Henry became mayor and had the Adventure Society check he wasn't a vampire.

When Hiram got to the window, he saw it was steamed up from the inside. That happened when someone cooked, but Dave normally brought a packed meal from the Madson girl who was sweet on him. Hiram opened the door to a humid food smell and someone talking.

"...use all kinds of fillings, but I like pork the best. You don't have that here, but the gonku lizard I used in these is pretty close. Which is weird because it's, you know, a lizard."

Dave's response was an incoherent mumble, due to the dumpling sticking out of his mouth. The room was basically a lounge area, with a large low table in the middle that was enchanted to function as a self-cleaning cooking surface, and there was a pan of dumplings sitting on it. Dave was facing the door while the room's other occupant sat across from him, with his back to Hiram.

The man turned around, flashing a big smile at Hiram. It had been a long time, and his features had been smoothed out by rank-ups, but Hiram would never forget Jason Asano. Not only had they been flung off a mountain together, but Jason went on to save the village from a terrible monster, almost dying in the process. They'd found him, almost cut in half, in the rubble that had once been their village.

He'd also gifted Hiram with what became the first of his granddaughter's essences. Hiram knew Jason hadn't been a wealthy man back then, just a freshly minted adventurer. Even so, he'd handed it to Hiram with a smile on his face, as if he was loaning a neighbour some tea.

"You look good, Hiram. All those mountain hikes are keeping you in shape."

Hiram refilled Jason's teacup.

"We didn't know what to make of it," Hiram said. "First, we hear you're dead. Then we hear you're alive again, and the stories only got less believable from there. But whatever people say about you, good or bad, you're a hero to the people in this town, Jason. The young ones like Dave don't remember, but those of us who were around back then..."

He let his words linger as he sipped at his tea.

"That day was a nightmare. You hear the stories of some high-rank monster tearing through a town, but you don't expect it to happen. Monsters are always a threat, out in these rural areas, but something like that?"

“Yeah, there was a thing messing with the monster surges,” Jason said. “It made the monster spawns a bit off. It’s fixed, now.”

Hiram shook his head.

“The why doesn’t matter to folks like us. What matters is children screaming as their parents drag them out of collapsing buildings. Pushing people onto wagons even as they’re taking off. Afraid that, at any second, some big watery tentacle will crash down and kill you all and there’s nothing you can do to stop it. You were just a kid, but you stood up. Put yourself between us and it. Bought us the time to get everyone out and safe. Now look at you, the big-time adventurer. You know, we never got to thank you properly for that.”

“You didn’t have to thank me, Hiram. That’s what adventurers do.”

“I was there, boy. I saw the looks on your friends’ faces. I may not have seen you in twenty years, but I get the feeling you spent a lot of it doing things that maybe adventurers don’t do.”

Jason chuckled.

“Maybe so,” he conceded, and sipped at his tea. “What about that granddaughter of yours? Did she ever become an adventurer?”

“Indeed, she did. A more modest one than you, I reckon, which suits me just fine. I like her coming home with stories of travel and adventure. I don’t want anyone fishing her out of the ruins of someone’s house, looking more dead than alive. No offence.”

“No, that’s a wise approach. Not in the cards for some of us, though. Did I ever tell you where I came from?”

“Not that I recall. I think you said it was somewhere remote. I remember thinking that it was a bit strange for an adventurer, some of the things you didn’t know.”

“Well, I’m not your granddaughter, but let me regale you with some of my stories of travel and adventure. Do you know what a universe is?”

Time always moved on. For long-lived adventurers, things stretched out, and change was slow. Exploring Greenstone, Jason was confronted with how different it was for those without access to age-extending magic. He stood on a rooftop, his cloak melding him invisibly into the shadow of a chimney. He watched a yard below, where a spry woman of late-middle years was hanging out washing on a line.

“Did you find out who she is?”

“I did,” Shade said. “This is Juliette Landry, the daughter of your former landlady. She inherited this property from her mother, who found a great deal of success in her later

years. She ended up owning five establishments in total. Each is now operated by her daughter or one of her nieces: Josephine, Joanne, Jennifer, and Bertha.”

“Bertha?”

“Madam Bertha Landry hosts the property with more structural reinforcement enchantments than the other. Her clientele can be quite rambunctious.”

“When did my Madam Landry pass?”

“Seven years ago. Apparently to the lament of several elderly but vigorous men who were rather unhappy to find out about each other after the fact. It was, by all accounts, a quite exciting memorial service.”

“Good for her,” Jason said with a sad smile. “All the years I was off doing weird dimensional stuff. How much did I miss back home, Shade?”

“You haven’t called Earth home in a long time, Mr Asano.”

“I suppose I haven’t.”

“You know that Arella thinks you’re going to kill her,” Vincent said.

“I’ve killed people for doing a lot less than she did,” Jason said. “But I’m not here to kill anyone.”

“Do you mind if I go change out of this bath robe?” Vincent asked. “I didn’t dress for a home invasion.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I wanted to be discreet. That’s why I waited until your husband left.”

“Oh, he’d have been delighted. He loves the adventurer stuff.”

Vincent left the sitting room of his town house and continued the conversation from the other room.

“You’d think that the messenger war and the rest of it would dampen his enthusiasm,” Vincent said. “He’s like a child sometimes, always looking for an adventure story.”

He walked back out in simple linen pants and a tunic he’d implausibly managed to put on without disrupting his moustache.

“Why are you here, Jason?”

“There are some organisational things we should probably sort out to make things go more smoothly.”

“Yes, but I have office hours.”

“But you were very clear with Gretchen that I’m not officially here.”

“You’re spying on me?”

“Uh... no?”

Vincent sighed.

“Gold rankers. This is why I transferred back to Greenstone, you know. I’ll go get my notebook.”

He walked over to a chair where a satchel had been tossed. He pulled out a notebook and a pencil, then gestured Jason into a seat. He sat opposite and was about to ask Jason a question when he stopped and set the pencil and book down on the couch beside him.

“How is Rufus?” he asked softly.

“He left this world. Fifteen years ago, now.”

Vincent sat bolt upright.

“He’s dead?”

“What? Oh, sorry, no. I mean he literally left this world. He’s been living on the one I came from. He’s fine. He’s really into jellybeans, like *really* into them. The fancy ones with weird flavours like ‘Barcelona asphalt’ or whatever. He’d definitely have diabetes if he wasn’t magical. I sent him to meet this person I’m trying to recruit over there, and he came back with about a wheelbarrow full of them.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Which is very nostalgic for me, so I suppose we’d better get to it.”

He picked his notebook back up.

“Now, we might as well start with nobles who want a meet and greet on arrival versus those asking for a more in-depth meeting.”

“There’s no reason for me to...”

Jason stopped himself, grimacing as he thought back over Danielle’s lessons. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Okay,” he said. “Nobles who want meetings, you say.”