

Chapter 476

A Damn Fine Way to Start Off a War

The Vitesse branch of the Adventure Society was bustling with activity. Miles Cotezee walked down a hallway towards one of the large briefing rooms with an unusual adventurer at his side. The man was an elf with reddish skin, stark white hair and golden eyes. His sand-coloured leather outfit had many tribal marking stitches into it forming beautiful patterns matched by the tattoos on his skin. The buckle of his belt depicted purple flames in the shape of a flower, the symbol of the Burning Violet guild.

He was lean and muscular, walking with an easy, languid grace. Nonetheless, Miles got the impression from him of a spring ready to launch. There was a quiet intensity to the man that reminded Miles of the man's father.

They entered the briefing room, which was set up like a lecture hall with a stage at the front and rows of chairs rising up a staggered floor. Humphrey Geller and his team were already waiting, Humphrey himself standing alert and watchful as they came in. Clive was fiddling with a recording crystal projector while Sophie, Belinda, Neil and Gary were sat around a table and chairs Belinda had made with her power to create simple objects. The cards they were playing with were not made by her power, following a number of wager-related incidents.

There was one member of the group absent, Jory, who had been summoned away by the church of the Healer. While Miles had been able to get travel dispensation to reunite Humphrey and Gary's teams, Jory was not a member of either. While neither he nor Belinda was happy about being separated again, especially in such uncertain times, they each had their own responsibilities.

Relationships amongst adventurers always had challenges. With travel frequent, those not in the same team could expect long periods of separation. For those that were on the same team, the logistics were easier but the dangers were far greater. Emotions overruling judgement could put the team in danger, while an acrimonious split could break teams apart.

Everyone looked up as Miles and the adventurer entered, looking over the stranger. Only Gary recognised him, the elf and the leonid exchanging a nod of greeting. Belinda started packing up the cards and dismissing her conjured furniture.

"I know that having an outsider made leader of your team, even temporarily, is not a situation anyone wants," Miles said. "Now that you've all been inducted into the Burning Violet, I was able to make sure it was someone from your guild."

"Hey, Ken," Gary said. "You've been keeping busy, I see."

"The hunt goes well," the elf said. "I was sorry to hear your path was darkened when the light of your companion was cast from it."

"There've been some dark days," Gary said, "but the ones ahead are looking brighter. Farrah's back."

Ken stood up a little straighter.

"The lady of stone and fire has returned to the path? How did this come to be?"

"Not sure how, exactly. I've got this friend whose disregard for the rules apparently extends to the laws of life and death. I'd say it'd get him into trouble but, from what I hear, he's running out of kinds of trouble to get into."

"I think you might be underestimating him," Neil said.

"It's some secretive whatever but I don't care," Gary said. "So long as my friends are alive and I can go find them, the hows and whys don't matter."

"I am glad that your path has brightened, Gareth."

"Ken, I told you to call me Gary."

"Yet you persist in calling my aunt Sweet Buns," Ken said.

"But she makes those really delicious sweet buns," Gary said. "I'm not being lascivious."

"Your words do not tell the same story as the tone in which you use them, Gareth."

"You did sound a little creepy," Belinda told Gary.

"Lindy..." Gary whined.

"How about we all introduce ourselves?" Miles interjected. "Well, not me and Gary. We already know everyone."

The elf nodded.

"I am Kenneth, son of Brian," he said.

"As in, Brian, son of Kevin?" Sophie asked.

"It is so," Ken said. "You know my father?"

"No, but I've heard stories of his power and skill," Sophie said. "And yours. You beat Rufus Remore."

Gary burst out laughing.

"Yeah," he said. "I wish I'd gotten to see that, but I didn't know Rufus back then. Apparently, he was a one-man gang of assholes before Ken knocked the excess pride out."

"Rufus was a Thadwick?" Clive asked.

"You shouldn't speak ill of the dead," Humphrey said.

“Why not?” Sophie asked. “That guy sold out his family, his world and his soul in that order. Now some monster is out there somewhere, using his body as a meat suit. There’s only ill to speak.”

“Then perhaps we should consider our team member who was once his companion and say nothing at all,” Humphrey said.

Sophie winced, turning to look at Neil.

“It’s fine,” Neil lied.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“Sorry, Neil,” Clive said.

The team introduced themselves. They’d been worried about whom they’d be saddled with, but if at least Gary knew him, they were willing to at least give him a chance. Not long after, more teams came shuffling into the room and sitting down. There was another team of silver-rankers and six teams of bronze-rankers. Once they had all arrived, the room was quite full.

The team, plus Ken and Gary followed Humphrey’s lead in sitting down in the front row, the bronze attendees knowing to leave it for the silvers. Miles stood in front of the assemblage to make an address.

“I’m going to start with some background so that everyone is in the same place in regards to the operation you will be conducting,” he began. “Some of what I have to say you should all already know, while some of you will be learning for the first time.”

He paused, making sure he had everyone’s attention.

“Roughly three and a half years ago, we first discovered the presence of the Builder cult and their intentions. Their goal was to tear strips off of our world with no regard for the death and destruction doing so would bring about. The cultists started taking people and torturing their souls until they opened those souls up to be implanted with star seeds that controlled them and turned them into slaves.”

Miles paused, letting everyone dwell on the topic. Everyone in the room knew someone who had been affected by star seed implantation.

“What we thought was a distraction proved to be something far more insidious. As a world, we turned to our gods for help against this invader from beyond our world, and the gods answered. How could we know that one of them was a traitor? Purity stepped up to help purge the star seeds from the victims of the cult. This put them in a crucial position in the widespread response to the cult. It was only later that we realised that this was all part of a plan for the Purity church to serve as infiltrators, handing the cult our plans and secrets.”

Miles' eyes fell on Clive.

"All around the world," he continued, "good people fought. Sacrificed. They uncovered the cult's secrets. One of those secrets is the reason we are here today."

Taking a moment, Miles panned his gaze around the room.

"Many of you have taken the fight to the Builder, but over the last couple of years, the Builder's activities have reduced. The Ecumenical Council had declared the church of Purity a fallen church. The gods have declared Purity as a fallen god. The church has been banished from every place where civilisation flourishes and once its remnants are but dried, dead leaves on the wind, the god itself will be sanctioned by the other gods."

Miles shook his head.

"You may be wondering what 'sanctioned' means and why the church must go before the gods can act. To be honest, so am I. I'm just a small man and know not the ways of the gods. But those who do tell me that we need to eliminate the church, so that's what we're doing. Of course, most of the Purity church had no idea of what was happening in the dark corners of their faith and turned from their fallen on finding out. They suffered perhaps the greatest betrayal of all as their so-called god of Purity handed our world to a being that would taint our very souls."

For a man claiming to not know the ways of gods, the anger boiling up in Miles was making him sound rather like a preacher. He was tapping into the rage all of them felt, a rage born of ruined lands and fallen friends.

"But there are those who did not forsake their foul deity," Miles continued. "Even losing most, the number that remains loyal to their dark deity is great. We have been hunting them down, the Adventure Society, the Magic Society and the churches. Many of you have joined that very task, as you do again in joining this operation. Unexpectedly, we have had the greatest success in dealing with their gold-rankers. Their numbers were lower and every gold-ranker is a known quantity. With the churches and the Adventure Society working together, we have captured or eliminated many of them. Clive, if you would?"

Clive got up and moved to the recording crystal projector, getting ready to use it.

"The church of Purity as much as abandoned their iron-rankers," Miles said. "Over the last several years, though, the bulk of their bronze and silver-rank loyalists have managed to avoid the forces seeking them out. Like the Builder cult, their activities have diminished over time. Partly this has been from their infrastructure being systematically eradicated and their resources taken or destroyed."

A projection appeared behind Miles, showing footage of smoke rising from the gutted ruins of a once-beautiful temple.

“I know that many have hoped that the reduced activity from the cult and the church reflects an end to their activities, especially with a historic monster surge upon us. Unfortunately, this surge is what they have been waiting for and it will be more historic than most of you are aware. The highest levels of the Adventure Society have access to a source with information that this monster surge will come with an invasion from the Builder’s forces. This will not be more cultists, although have no doubt that the existing cultists will join in. These are forces from beyond our world, with power and numbers we don’t yet know. We do know that it will be bad.”

The image switched from the ruined church to a vast city island, sitting in the ocean. Then a sky city, floating in the clouds. Another was a mountain carved into a fortress city that descended from the air, crushing a forest underneath it as it settled on the ground.

“These appear to be staging platforms for the invasion,” Miles said. “They’re appearing around the world but, for now, are showing limited activity. Their scouts are attacking anything that comes close but otherwise remain passive. Our high-rankers are assessing the threat.”

At this point, there was a lot of consternation in the room. Miles waited for it to die down before continuing.

“At this stage, we are not asking you to engage the Builder invasion. Your role, in this mission, is to eliminate a potential threat before it emerges to strike our backs when we need it least. Mr Clive Standish will be filling you in on the specifics.”

Miles took Clive’s seat.

“The missing forces of the church of Purity are our concern for this operation,” Clive explained. “We believe that the church is hiding these forces in a series of magically hidden strongholds, awaiting the monster surge and the invasion. The reason we believe this is because we found one.”

Clive tapped the projector and the image changed to an idyllic valley, shrouded in mist.

“This,” Clive said, “Is beautiful and remote. It is also a lie. What you are looking at is an illusion on a grand scale, perpetuated by an illusion array so large they’d have had to invent new kinds of rituals to make it work. Which is exactly what they did.”

He tapped the projector and it showed an image of a river.

“Those of you versed in rudimentary magic theory will know that one of the ways in which ambient magic is most active is in the flow of water. Waterways, especially large ones, carry large amounts of ambient magic.”

The projection became a vast dam.

“At the head of the valley I just showed you is a dam. That dam is collecting the ambient magic, converting it and feeding it into the grand illusion and masking the expansive population of Purity clergy that have been hiding there. What we have determined is that the illusion is incapable of masking anything stronger than a silver-rank aura, so we believe this is where at least a portion of their missing bronze and silver adherents are. As best we can tell, no gold-rankers are amongst them, to avoid the expansive search methods the Magic Society has been employing. Their primary defence is secrecy.”

“Then how did we find them?” Someone called out.

“Several years ago, the Magic Society cracked the portal network that the cult and the church had been using,” Clive said. “Eventually they figured out that we could track them through it, which we believe to be one of several reasons for their reduction in activity. Someone in the Adventure Society has been studying use patterns over the time we were tracking their activity and noted a number of anomalies. Some were nothing, but one turned out to be something.”

Clive turned off the projector.

“You will be one wing of a series of groups forming a strike force that will hit the Purity stronghold and hit it hard. Mr Cotezee has marshalling instructions for your team leaders; to prevent information leaks, we leave in the morning.”

When the teams had all shuffled out, Miles, Ken, Gary, and Jason’s team were all that was left in the room.

“A few more of these briefings and there’s no way the Purity church or the cult doesn’t hear about it,” Miles said. “You’re a devious woman, Belinda Callahan.”

“Well,” she said. “You have all these bronze and silver-rankers sitting around before the fight with the Builder starts. Why not take the time to see which ones are playing for the other side?”

“They’re hardly sitting around, Miss Callahan,” Miles said. “Unless you forgot, there’s a monster surge going on.”

“How certain are you that no one will discover the trackers you placed on the chairs?” Humphrey asked.

“Almost completely,” Belinda said.

"It's quite brilliant," Clive said. "Belinda has a knack for using magic outside of its original purpose; this kind of tracking is normally used on pets and children, rather than enemies. The magic is faint, so as not to be obtrusive in a city full of essence users, but quite easily noticed by anyone with magic senses. At least, this is normally the case."

"The thing is," Belinda said, picking up the explanation, "there's a monster surge happening. The magic of the trackers will blend right into the abnormalities in all the ambient magic right now. Unless they know exactly what to look for and how, even a gold-ranker would almost certainly fail to notice it. It's just a substance we left on the chairs, not any kind of device they would find on themselves. The only way they would find it is if they had some tracking-protection powers."

"Which I filtered out when selecting teams for this," Miles said.

"Any anti-tracking items are already being confiscated on entering the building as part of the new security measures," Humphrey realised.

"What if they change pants?" Neil asked. "Won't they leave the tracking stuff behind?"

"That's one of the reasons we're setting a tight timeline," Miles said. "We want them acting in a hurry, surrendering caution for speed as any traitors rush to warn the church of the threat."

"It's not perfect," Belinda said, "but chasing perfect is how you miss out on the good."

"It's only to give our gold-rank investigators a hand," Miles said. "Our Builder-response team only has a few of them and we don't have more gold-rankers to spare for this operation. We need to save them for the end."

"Clive, Belinda," Humphrey said. "You've both done very well."

"Of course I did," Belinda said.

"Just because it's not a surprise," Humphrey said, "that doesn't mean your work is not appreciated."

"The hard part," Miles said, "was getting enough of the higher-ups to approve this without letting the others know the true purpose. Getting them to go along with this and involve so many teams was tricky."

"But worth it, right?" Sophie asked.

"Absolutely," Miles said. "If we can wipe out this stronghold and root out a bushel of traitors, that's a damn fine way to start off a war."

"Does this meant there won't truly be a battle?" Ken asked. "Why did no one speak to me of the stratagem before I bought so many extra spears?"

"Because you're the new guy," Sophie said.

"Be nice," Belinda chided. "You were the new guy, once."