

Chapter 835

Paranoid

Lightning struck so fast that the last peal of thunder was still rumbling when the next one set the sky to shuddering. Adventurers took shelter under the forest of iron towers jutting from the blasted landscape. Most were silver-rankers, but a small number of golds worked to shield the others from the lightning as they worked. They were clearing rubble that had been a mesa until Undeath's avatar destroyed it.

The adventurers hauled away fragments of shattered rock while also extracting certain parts. The remains of the lightning catchment array that had once topped the mesa were being delivered to Jason, along with a small supply of the rubble. The catchment array was comprised mostly of magical iron, now broken and twisted apart.

Jason fed the remains of the array into his cloud flask, along with chunks of rubble. This involved poking the tiny mouth of the flask with large bits of metal and rock which were drawn inside. Dimensional compression visibly warped the chunks so they could be absorbed, looking like they were sucked in by a cartoon vacuum cleaner.

Miriam Vance watched this from under another giant lightning rod, her expression troubled. She was recovering her mana after a shift shielding silver-rankers, the lighting tough for even a gold-ranker to handle for long. Arabelle Remore moved next to her, likewise recovering her mana.

"Tactical Commander," she said by way of greeting.

"Mrs Remore."

Arabelle looked at Miriam's expression and then followed her gaze to Jason. She then activated a privacy screen that cut out the sound of thunder. They stood side by side, watching Jason work.

"Something about our Operations Commander has you troubled," Arabelle observed.

"I can't help but wonder what he's not telling me."

"As a keeper of most of Jason Asano's secrets, I can assure you that there are many things he's not telling you. I don't believe you need to be concerned about that, but I can see how you would feel differently as the one being kept in the dark. Jason has told me that I should share some things with you if I feel it is appropriate. If you can tell me what troubles you specifically, then perhaps I can alleviate your worries, if only a little."

"I still don't understand what happened with the avatar."

"I'm not sure that any of us do. Perhaps not even Jason himself, fully. That conflict took place in the realm of gods and we are but mortals. Even Jason, for now."

“For now?”

“You know the company he keeps, allies and enemies. You’ve heard the stories, even seen it for yourself, sometimes. Gods, great astral beings. The astral kings don’t care about any of us as individuals, but his name they know. Their messengers hate him with a fervour I can only describe as religious.”

“But it’s more than that, isn’t it? ‘Mortal for now’ isn’t a phrase to be used lightly.”

“No,” Arabelle agreed. “It’s not. Astral kings are not mortals. And if we succeed here, Jason will be one of them. While I believe that is meant to be a secret, Jason has proven unreliable at keeping them, at least those about himself.”

“Jason’s imminent ascension to the ranks of our most grave enemies does not ease my mind. I’ve been fighting messengers since they first arrived at Yaresh. Long before the Adventure Society staged an organised attack, I was standing beside the Holy Knowledge Army, who were ready and waiting. All anyone talks about is the adventurers fighting, but when the adventurers were fighting the monster surge, it was a scant few of us and some barely-trained holy legions that held the messengers back. Kept them contained in their strongholds. Lady Allayeth, my team and barely a handful of other brave souls.”

“You fought with Knowledge’s forces?”

“You’d barely know they existed for all anyone speaks of them now. But they were the ones who held the line. They were the ones who took most of the losses. You know the goddess has been training them for more than a decade? There’s no point sending any soldier less than silver-rank at a messenger. I can’t even fathom how much money the church must have spent on monster cores. And these soldiers didn’t even know what fight they were preparing for. And in the meanwhile, the god of War was pressuring them for overstepping their bounds.”

“You hate the messengers.”

“You’ve seen what they’ve left of my home. And now Asano is going to be one of their kings?”

“The astral kings are not as monolithic as we thought.”

“So says the messenger our Operations Commander gets along with oh so well. And he’s hardly the first, is he? It wasn’t long before this expedition that he was hiding from the Adventure Society for stashing away messengers. Protecting enemy prisoners.”

“You would have killed them.”

“Not before extracting every scrap of information we could wring from their bodies.”

“Which is why he protected them.”

“I tried, Mrs Remore. Lady Allayeth told me that Asano could be trusted and I tried, I truly did. We get along, and we work together well. I’ve come to like him; rely on him even. But everything I see points to an agenda that’s a mystery at best. At worst, it intersects with that of the enemy. We went underground to protect my city, but he came for the same things the messengers want. A soul forge, whatever that is. And with it, he’ll become one of them.”

“You have a lot more problems with our commander than just his fight with the avatar, I see.”

“Maybe if I could understand. I’ve asked Asano about this several times and the more I try to get to the facts, the more he answers in riddles and metaphors.”

“I believe that is all he has to give. I’ve discussed this with him at length, now, and I have also had my fill of metaphors. Which he tells me, with a frustrating unhelpfulness, is the entire point. And I was there, so I believe him. I stood in a place where imagination and reality were one and the same. I witnessed that fight, as much as anyone can have been said to, but all I can tell you is what I already have done. We are mortals and it was a battle of gods. Jason almost lost himself to fight it.”

“That may be the crux of what troubles me. That nonsense about coming back from some false god state by... I still don’t understand. Something about a children’s toy. How can such a monumental thing be so frivolous? So childish? So inconsequential?”

“I will accept frivolous and childish as valid, Tactical Commander, but not inconsequential. That was extremely important.”

“How?”

“Jason Asano is not a stable man. By the time I met him, he had already been through several profoundly traumatic experiences. He’d acquitted himself well, but no one goes through such things undamaged. It’s why they call in people like me, and this was a man who saved my son’s life.”

“I never saw Jason as he was at the very beginning. His world is safer than ours and he had to adapt quickly. He was thrown into events he didn’t understand from the very first moment. No power, no training and he still managed to save my son. I will always owe him for that, so I will do anything in my power to help him.”

“Even if he turns against us.”

“This is why what happened with the avatar is not as inconsequential as you think. The adventuring life changes us all, and his experience was exciting more than most. I saw the early stages of his transformation from a fundamentally ridiculous young man into

a very dangerous one. Not just to his enemies but to everyone; to himself most of all. You know that he left our world for a time and returned?"

"Yes."

"That was when he suffered the worst of it. When most of those he could rely on were out of reach, myself included. Those he should have been able to rely on were unable to accept what he'd been forced to become, to survive our world and to save his."

"He saved his world?"

"Yes. And as with the avatar, he almost lost himself to do so. When he came back, he was fractured. A maelstrom of rage, barely contained by the plastered-on façade of a man he used to be. None of us were sure he would ever be made whole, but I dedicated the last year to that goal. I've done other work over that period, but Jason has been my central project."

"You aren't painting a hopeful picture for me, Mrs Remore. You're describing someone not just unstable but so unstable that he shouldn't be in charge of a market stall, let alone this expedition."

"Is that what you've experienced working with him?"

"No," Miriam admitted. "He's been unconventional, but that has been what we needed. I don't think a conventional approach would have kept us alive this far. But he's led us beyond the edges of any map I've ever heard of."

"See?" Arabelle asked. "Sometimes a metaphor is the best explanation you have to give."

Miriam grunted her reluctant acceptance of the point.

"What happened with the avatar mattered," Arabelle continued. "The thing that pulled Jason back to himself, that spoke the very core of who he was, was just as you said: frivolous and childish. It made those of us who know and care about him ecstatic."

"Why?"

"Because it proved something that we've been hoping for ever since he came back to us. That he hadn't been entirely lost. That, at his core, he's still closer to the absurd man who arrived on our world the first time than the bloodthirsty maniac who arrived the second time. You asked what happens if he turns against us. We've been worried about that since he came back. He'll never be exactly who he was, but none of us are. Life changes us all, and the adventuring life more than most. Especially the adventuring life."

"That's true," Miriam said.

"What we saw took something that we believed and showed us absolute proof that we were right. That the man he is now is fundamentally still the man we knew. The man

who infuriates almost everyone, yet draws heroes to him like flies. Who will take a good sandwich over a great treasure. A man who throws barbecues where diamond-rankers sit and eat with everyday people because he believes that they are worth the same. Believes it with such an unconscious conviction that, if only for a little while, they believe it too.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“Yes! Utter nonsense! That’s who he is: the man who does the nonsensical and makes the world accept it through sheer force of will. The man who helps people for no more reason than they need help. Even if they’re messengers. Even if it kills him. And now we have proof of that.”

“Proof for you. It still doesn’t mean anything to me. I’m responsible for everyone in this expedition.”

“So is he.”

“But he didn’t come here to do what this expedition was sent to do. We’re here to protect what’s left of my city, but he isn’t. He’s after that soul forge, just like the messengers. The messengers he brought into our base of operations.”

“That’s true,” Arabelle said. “His primary goal was to keep the soul forge from the messengers. To take it for himself if he could. Sometimes, Jason won’t be able to hold the same values as you or I. Not if he’s going to keep working on a scale that includes gods and great astral beings. It’s something that has worried him since he saw the path his life was taking.”

“I don’t care about that. Even assuming he won’t betray us, that’s not the same as being on our side. What happens if he has to choose between this soul forge and Yaresh? Between the soul forge and keeping the members of this expedition alive?”

“Those goals are aligned.”

“And look at the madness we had to go through to get to that point. Madness that he led us into, every time.”

Arabelle frowned.

“Tactical Commander, I think you need some sleep.”

“Is that your professional opinion, healer?”

“Yes. Think about what you’re saying. You’re suggesting that Jason hatched a wildly elaborate plan that would have required not just the knowledge but the cooperation of the Builder cult, the messengers and an undead army. Not to mention multiple gods, two of whom have been antagonists for, as far as I can tell, as long as they’ve existed. If he could manage all of that, he wouldn’t need to. He’d be in such control of the situation that he

would get everything he wanted without any of us ever needing to come down here. He'd get it all and we'd never even know."

Miriam's cognitive dissonance was plain, as expressions of anger, fear and uncertainty warred on her face.

"That's not... I am tired."

"You need rest, Tactical Commander. Jason might be officially in charge, but you've been the one really running the expedition. You've scheduled the gold-rankers claiming territories for the next week already. Clive probably knows what he's doing here and there's nothing we can do about it if he's wrong. As the healer in charge of the expedition's mental health, I'm directing you to get a full week of rest. That way you might at least get a few days before you ignore me and go back to work. Do I have to go to Archbishop Shavar and have you formally removed from your position?"

"And if I say no?"

"Well, you could fight me on it, but I think we both know how that would go. What would your lady Allayeth tell you to do?"

Miriam glowered, but finally gave a curt nod.

"She'd tell me to listen to the healer."