

## Chapter 153:

### Legacy

Emir and Constance were walking toward the cloud palace main exit.

“Who did the voice projection circle?” Emir asked.

“Trent,” Constance said.

“Do you mean ‘the glass definitely won’t break’ Trent or ‘can’t hold up a fish’ Trent?”

“We’re not calling him that,” Constance admonished. “It was a suppurating grease fish. No one could have held it up.”

“Elspeth Arella could have,” Emir said. “We should have gotten her fired so we could hire her ourselves.”

Constance shook her head in weary exasperation.

“You need to stop doing that.”

“Danielle wanted me to do it.”

“We stay hands-off in local politics,” Constance said. “That’s your policy.”

“It seems warranted, here.”

“It always does to you, which is why you put me in charge of not letting you.”

“We’re already neck-deep, with this astral space business.”

“That’s not local politics,” Constance said. “It’s international politics. Interdimensional, if Standish is to be believed.”

“Clive,” Emir said with a sigh. “I can’t believe Jason snaked him out from under us.”

“That is exactly how you described your own recruitment attempt.”

“He’s a good lad, Asano.”

“It wouldn’t have worked, you know,” Constance said.

“Oh, I reckon we could have won him over. He’s wasted in this backwater.”

“No, I mean the fish,” Constance said. “Arella actually couldn’t have held it. Suppurating grease fish oil is resistant to telekinesis.”

“It is?”

“That’s why we went to so much trouble to find it.”

“I thought we were just going to cook it.”

“You thought we spent three weeks, using over a dozen people to find and catch a very specific and hard to find fish just so we could eat it?”

“No,” Emir said unconvincingly. “What did we want it for again?”

“The Rimaros job.”

“Oh, right. Where we dug that tunnel through the bottom of the floating island and slipped out with the... what were we stealing again?”

“We weren’t stealing,” Constance said. “We were repatriating the royal ceremonial armour of Kodin.”

“Right, yes. That ridiculous armour that looked like someone inflated it. I’m surprised they even wanted it back.”

“It has cultural importance to the people of Kodin,” Constance said.

“It felt like stealing. Did they figure out it was us?”

“They did,” Constance said. “Greg didn’t get the mango cart in place in time. On the bright side, they couldn’t admit they had the armour in the first place, so everyone’s pretending it didn’t happen.”

“Right,” Emir said, nodding. “‘Not enough mangoes’ Greg.”

“No, that was ‘fruit cart’ Greg. We got rid of ‘not enough mangoes’ Greg after what he was caught doing to those hairless oxen.”

“That was him? Good riddance, then. We lost a bundle cleaning that mess up. What happened to him?”

“We released him to the local authorities. Have you ever considered not basing your hiring policies on getting people with the same name?” Constance asked.

“I tried that in the early days,” Emir said. “People are much more resistant to nicknames when there’s no one else with the same name as them.”

“Are the nicknames an essential part of the operation?”

“Why do you think I do all this?” Emir asked.

“Money, power, travel, excitement and connections.”

“Those are the tawdry goals of the weak,” Emir said loftily. “We gold-rankers strive for higher purpose.”

“I think you’ve been spending too much time with Jason. You’re talking increasing amounts of rubbish.”

They reached the exit and started walking across the cloud bridge to the shore where the iron-rankers and other attendees were assembled next to the reception building.

“Is everyone out of the palace?” Emir asked as they surveyed the crowd of adventurers.

“We’re the last,” Constance said. “It’s ready to change over.”

At the end of the platform, in front of where everyone had assembled was a faintly glowing ritual circle. After he and Constance stepped off the cloud bridge, Emir reached into his jacket and pulled out a large, round-bottomed flask. He shook the flask, then took

out the stopper, releasing four streams of mist that each took different shapes. One looked like a house, another like a large vehicle. The third was a small replica of the cloud palace, while the fourth was a ship. Emir put his hand through the mist ship and the four images returned to the flask. As he put the flask back into his dimensional jacket, the cloud palace slowly started to warp out of shape.

Emir turned from the palace which was beginning the process of turning back into a cloud ship. He stepped into the glowing ritual circle and began to speak.

“Greetings, fellow adventurers,” he said, the magic circle projecting his voice over the crowd. “As you all know, I have come to this fine city with a purpose. Many, I’m sure, have heard whispers and rumours, but today, all shall be laid bare. Centuries ago, there was an ancient order of assassins. Known and feared the world over, their enemies came together to scour them from the face of our world. Today, only hidden remnants can be found, and those only with time and effort. Myself and others have undertaken that time and effort, which brings us to today.”

He panned his gaze over the crowd.

“This order of assassins was known as the Order of the Reaper. Going all the way back to the days of their organisation was wiped out, there have been legends of a legacy they left behind. Of a test, for those with the potential to receive this legacy. For years now, I have been seeking that legacy, and finally, I have found it. In the days before this city was founded, the last fortress of the order was hidden away in what was then a remote and unpopulated region.”

Not everyone had their full attention on Emir as the cloud palace deformed behind his back in the transition from grand residence to ocean-going vessel.

“As you have no doubt surmised,” Emir continued, “the purpose for which you have been gathered is to claim this legacy. The ancient, hidden fortress is now in ruins, but the true heart of the complex remains unpenetrated. It lies within an astral space of its own, waiting for those brave and skilled enough to face the trials within. This is no ordinary astral space aperture, however. To protect their secrets the Order had it sealed, the means of opening it scattered across the world. Those means have now been gathered and the aperture is ready to be opened. The trials are ready to begin.”

He made a sweeping gesture, taking in the crowd.

“Just from the fact that I have gathered you all here, you have all certainly realised that things are not so simple as I have described. Even once opened, the aperture still comes with restrictions, for within lies the true test. A series of trials left by the Order of the Reaper. Tests, to see who can live up to their ideals. Only those with the most untapped

potential, iron-rankers, may enter. The first of those to pass every trial will receive the legacy left behind. As a warning, the trials shall remain open for eighteen days, after which they will again seal themselves closed. Any of you who have not returned by then will not return at all.”

Emir took an object from his jacket and held it in front of him. Above his head, a large image of a gold and black scythe appeared.

“No one knows the full extent of the order’s legacy. What we do know is that it includes this object. It is the ancient symbol of the order and the object of years of searching. The goal for each of you is to bring me this item. Anything else you find in that place, part of the order’s legacy or not, is yours to keep. Additionally, whichever team brings the scythe to me will receive five legendary awakening stones, which you may be chosen freely from my stores. If you are a team of one, then all five shall belong to you. Beyond the stones, however, is another prize.”

Emir gestured behind him, where the cloud palace was still deforming.

“My cloud palace is a wonder, but it did not come to me as you see it here. It is a growth item I had the good fortune to come across when I, like you now, was only an iron ranker. Many years later I came across the man who created it, a diamond ranker. In payment for a service rendered, he gave me a second one, still at iron rank. Whomsoever brings me the scythe will receive it for themselves.”

A susurrus of noise rippled through the crowd. The cloud palace had been dominating the skyline of the Adventure Society skyline for weeks. Every person assembled wanted to claim one.

“So, you all now know what you are here for. Once the cloud palace has returned to the form of a ship all the iron-rankers participating may come aboard to see it for themselves. We will sail along the coastline to the closest location to our objective and travel overland from there. Our destination is one the locals may know of: Sky Scar Lake. The ruins are at the bottom of the lake, which is very deep, so you have until my ship leaves in four hours to prepare for that dive. Consider it your first challenge. Be here and ready to board at that time.”

Emir stepped out of the speaking circle. People immediately tried to approach but a portal appeared next to him, which he stepped through with Constance before it vanished.

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The crowd was thrown into turmoil as Emir finished his speech. Some were being exhorted by their family elders to obtain a cloud palace at any cost. Others were already

dashing in the direction of the trade hall, looking for items to let them handle the water of the lake.

Jason and Beth's teams were caught up in the swirl of people pushing their way out of the crowd.

"Does your team have a way of getting through the lake?" Beth asked once they were free.

Jason nodded. "There's a ritual I know. I assume you do too, Clive."

"I know the one you're talking about. I'd have to look it up, though."

"I can do it, no worries," Jason said, then turned back to Beth. "What about you?"

"I have the water essence," she said. "One of my abilities will do the job."

"I guess we'll make some final preparations and see you in a few hours, then."

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Many people were eager to get aboard the cloud palace, now transformed back into a ship the size of an ocean liner. Boarding did not go as smoothly as planned for some when it was revealed that a requirement of participation was a simple aura test. Anyone whose aura didn't match the Adventure Society records from prior to the expedition was excluded. Only a handful of people were caught out like this but were vocal in their protests. Instead of being heard out, however, they were taken away for closer examination.

On the ship, Jason's team were given their own cabins, alongside those assigned to Rufus, Gary and Farrah's parents. Rufus' parents were staying in Greenstone, making discrete inquiries into the church of Purity. Their teammate, Cal, had already left to check out the Landemere estate. The bulk of the iron-rankers were all bunked together in crew dorms, while the actual crew enjoyed cabins like Emir's guests.

As with the guest wing when it had been a cloud palace, the ship had a guest lounge with access to a broad side-deck. Humphrey quickly went off to invite their friends out of the press of people domiciled together below decks, bringing back Rick and Beth's teams. He also brought along Lance and his team as well.

"Mose!" Jason greeted happily. "It's been a while. What's up, mate?"

"Beth finally let me in her team," Mose said happily. "I think she wanted some extra power after you beat her like that."

Mose Cavendish was Beth's cousin, who Jason had known longer than Beth. They had met on a mission to escort spirit coins, where Jason had witnessed the destructive power of Mose's spells.

"That wasn't me," Jason said. "You can blame Humphrey for that one. He's predicted exactly how your cousin would react if we could put her on the back foot."

Rufus and Gary soon joined them and the group socialised as the ship sailed its way south down the coast. It was only a few hours before it sailed into shore at an unremarkable patch of desert. Emir's people started unloading sand barges from the ship. None were the size of the great Ustei tribe barge, but three of them were enough to transport the whole group inland to Sky Scar Lake.

It was hours more, going into the night by the time the barges arrived at the lake, vast almost to the point of an inland sea. It was a vast oasis in the desert, a blessed eye of blue and green in the hard, yellow face of the desert. The lights of villages situated all around the shore of the lake shone in the early dark. There were towns and villages situated all around the lake and the sand barges disembarked their charges at the largest.

The adventurers were gathered and notified that they would begin in the morning. The townsfolk had been warned ahead of time about the coming influx and had beds for those who wanted them or food and drink for those who didn't. Emir brought out the cloud palace again, right on the surface of the lake, allowing selected people to use that for accommodation.

The next day, the locals set out tables and brought out food and drink en masse to feed the anxious horde of adventurers. Not even the elite adventurers from overseas were immune to the nervousness. For all their training and prestige, they were still iron rankers and, coming from high-magic regions, they didn't have the individual monster hunting experience of the locals.

Some didn't eat out of nervousness while others couldn't wolf down food. Humphrey walked around with Neil, Sophie and Belinda.

"Next time you'll be an adventurer, too," Sophie told Belinda.

"Very likely," Humphrey said. "An astral space untouched for centuries will likely have accumulated a good number of essences and awakening stones. If we're lucky, they'll be unusual ones, although that's down to the nature of the astral space."

"People don't talk about it much, because of how it went," Neil said, "but the expedition was quite a good haul."

"That's how Jason got you so many awakening stones on the open market," Humphrey said to Sophie. "Did you see him leave this morning?"

"I saw him duck out early with Clive," Sophie said.

"Is that them there?" Belinda asked, pointing. The others followed her gaze to see Clive and Jason behind some kind of cooking stall in aprons. There was a line of people leading up to them as they rapidly worked a large grill plate in front of them. Jason was

wearing some kind of puffy white hat and his aprons had the words 'you can't fight monsters on an empty stomach' emblazoned on it.

"Oh, hey!" Jason called out as he spotted their approach. "Clive is teaching me to barbecue eels properly!"