

Chapter 550

Preferred Option

Watching the skimmer from a hidden position in the jungle canopy, Sophie observed the eight men riding in it. Stealth was not her forte, but scouting was a key role for her so she was at least adequate at hiding her aura. With the inexperienced auras of the men she was watching, it was more than enough.

She knew hired thugs when she saw them. Their gear, like the thugs themselves, was silver-rank but taken from the bottom of the barrel. The only decent piece of equipment they had was their land skimmer, with their armour and weapons being third-rate goods that even a freshly-minted silver-rank adventurer would turn their nose up at. Equipment of that quality would be unlikely to show up in the general markets of Livaros, let alone the trade halls. Sophie guessed that it was sourced from one of the smaller cities and that the thugs themselves were as well.

Sophie had let Shade assess the men in the approaching skimmer before she moved into their path and his analysis had been no less disdainful than hers. Their gear was only one of many indicators of their mediocrity, the most obvious being their auras.

Monster core use saturated all their auras, but that alone did not preclude them from being adventurers, even capable ones. Many craftspeople used cores while also maintaining Adventure Society membership. They were often part-timers that took contracts to fund their crafting pursuits, and craftspeople adventurers were as active as anyone else during a surge. Craft-oriented adventurers were typified by their excellent gear, however, and while they might not be guild-level elites, their aura training was never as sloppy as what these thugs were displaying.

These were no craftsmen out looking to earn capital for their business endeavours. Shade had easily eavesdropped on their conversation to uncover their intentions. These weren't just general hired thugs but a small gang hired specifically to intercept Sophie, having been informed of her intended route. Rather than use Shade's scouting to avoid them, she decided to place herself directly in their path.

"I'm still not sure about going after an adventurer," Ramon said yet again.

"Then you shouldn't have come," Corvis told him.

"You said I had to."

"You did have to. You're the healer."

"I'm not much of a healer."

“Oh, we know,” Galen said from the driver seat of the skimmer.

“What I meant was that I don’t have a lot of healing abilities,” Ramon said, glaring at the back of Galen’s head.

“What I meant,” Galen shot back, “is that you’re terrible at everything. When we meet this adventurer, maybe at least wait for the fight to start before running.”

“Kiss my ass, Galen.”

“I did, while you were sleeping. Now I have a rash.”

The rest of the skimmer’s occupants burst out laughing.

“I hate you all,” Ramon said. “We’ll see how funny it is when this adventurer kicks the guts out of all of you.”

“It’s one adventurer,” Corvis said, “and you know they don’t send the good ones on these delivery runs. Why would anyone hire us to take on an elite?”

The eight men in the skimmer were, as Sophie postulated, members of a small gang from the nearby city. One of many satellite groups to the local cartel, they were mostly strongmen who kept the local low-end officials in line. They were small-time men who had found their niche, not reaching silver-rank until they were all into their forties.

The thugs operated around the border between the Storm Kingdom that controlled the coast and Giralano, the inland nation that lay to the south. While ostensibly a kingdom, Giralano was famously controlled by cartels known for producing substances that ranged from heavily controlled to outright banned in many of the world’s nations. This was due to many of the rare or outright unique plants that grew in the region and minerals that formed underground. Giralano faced strong public sanctions for the goods they grew and mined, with their neighbours heavily controlling the landlocked nation’s borders.

The illicit leadership of Giralano maintained its position through a series of under-the-table deals made with powerful groups within its neighbouring countries. These groups propped up Giralano’s puppet government while making sure their own governments only paid lip service to suppressing the cartels and their smuggling pipelines.

The Adventure Society didn't care about borders. Their concern was keeping monsters out of population centres, regardless of who ran them or how corrupt they were. So long as the Adventure Society's activities were not interfered with, they would refrain from interfering in turn.

The neutrality of the Adventure Society was why Sophie was heading in the direction of Giralano and its border city of Casallini. Her delivery was a relatively small and specialised one, as the local authorities managed most of the needs inside Giralano’s

borders. Only with critical resources not easily sourced within Giralano itself would the Adventure Society force the Storm Kingdom to supply their sketchy neighbour.

Sophie was in the region where Giralano came closest to the coast. It was close enough that a sufficiently tall hill gave her a fine view of the Sea of Storms. The proximity to the water made it a key region for smuggling, with many semi-hidden pathways through the jungle-covered hills between the border and the shore.

The land skimmer had emerged onto the roadways from a smuggler's path, having used it to avoid the border checkpoints that dotted the roads. Normally there would also be patrols, but they had been suspended for the duration of the monster surge.

Galen drew the land skimmer to a stop, around twenty metres from the woman standing in the middle of the roadway. She was a celestine with chocolate skin, silver hair and matching eyes. She wore form-fitting leather armour of brown and green with a motif of silver leaves. It was the kind of well-made, expensive gear that successful adventurers used. The men in the skimmer sat, staring at her as she started back.

"She's gorgeous," Corvis said.

"She's a silver-rank celestine," Ramon said. "They're all gorgeous. If you made a big list of people who are obviously going to be so good-looking that you feel bad for them having to be near you, high-ranking celestines will be at the top."

"We should move to the Storm Kingdom," Galen said wistfully. "Celestines everywhere."

"I'm not sure how appealing they'd find you," Corvis said. "I don't think they go for men whose social life was curtailed by the church of Purity closing because his nights out usually require cleansing magic after."

"And before, if I'm being honest," Galen admitted.

"Really?" Ramon asked. "Galen, are you still doing whatever it was with the stinky fruit and the slider thing?"

"It's not a sliding thing," Galen said. "It's a pump."

"I don't care what it is. I just don't want you cleaning it on the dining table. Or the coffee table. Or in the house at all, really."

"Hey!" the woman called out. "I might be on a loose schedule, but it's still a schedule. Can you hurry up and try to kidnap me so I can start punching you, please?"

"Does she know why we're here?"

"Obviously she knows why we're here."

"That's bad, right?"

Sophie had the reflexes to dodge the half-dozen magic projectiles coming at her in quick succession, but she kept dashing right towards them. Her hands blurred as she used them to intercept the attacks like she was plucking berries.

Ability: [Radiant Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability (magic).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (39%).

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage, which is highly effective against magical defences and intangible or incorporeal enemies. Unarmed attacks do not trigger retaliation effects. Negate any non-damage effects from actively intercepted attacks.

- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Impervious] when intercepting non-physical attacks. Gain mana when intercepting magical projectiles.

- Effect (silver): After intercepting a magical projectile you may make a disruptive-force projectile attack.

- [Impervious] (boon, magic, stacking): Resistances are increased and damage reduction is gained against non-physical damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

She threw out a hand, using the energy of the projectiles she absorbed to fire projectiles of her own. They were disruptive-force, not ideal for harming flesh or armour but excellent against magical shields and intangible entities. For that reason, she aimed them at the healer, around whom a bubble shield glimmered with a faint blue tint.

Sophie was outnumbered eight to one, which was just enough to make it fun. If the crappy gear and crappier auras didn't give away that they'd never had adventurer training, their skills certainly did. They were as bad as Greenstone experts, which was Sea of Storms garbage. Any adventurer who never left Greenstone was like the guy who never left his small town and had the same petrol station job at thirty-eight he'd been doing since high school. Sophie didn't know what that meant but Jason had assured her it was scathing.

The fight was not a swift one because Sophie didn't inflict a lot of damage, at least in the beginning, and was more susceptible to damage when enemies managed to land a hit. Her Karmic Warrior power promised an inevitable transition, however, as those conditions

were slowly but surely flipped. Every offensive action taken against her gave a small but cumulative enhancement to her power and spirit attributes, increasing the damage from her flying fists and feet. This affected not just her strength but her powers that added damage to her attacks.

Even more impactful were the karma effects of the power. Every attack against her gave her the good karma boon and the enemy the bad karma affliction. The more good karma she had, the less damage she suffered from those with bad karma. As for her enemies, their bad karma had them suffering transcendent damage every time they attacked her. The amount was inconsequential at first but climbed with every attack.

The growth of these effects wasn't infinite. There was a maximum threshold, although Sophie's Child of the Celestial Wind power raised the threshold of all boons, meaning that her good karma could climb higher than normal. By the time the fight had gone on for several minutes, most of the enemy's attacks were too weak to harm her at all.

Up until that stage, the fight had been thrilling. The thugs weren't any good but they were still silver-rankers. Sophie had moved through them like a dust devil, delivering rapid-fire attacks and disrupting spell chants with a fist or a foot to the mouth. High-rank bodies were unlike normal bodies and she had continued her ongoing experiments on the directions that silver-rank joints would bend.

She didn't have any suppression collars so she took what was her preferred option anyway and beat most of them to death. She left a couple alive for questioning, which wasn't hard. They weren't going to bleed to death unless someone like Jason came along, and silver-rank limbs would grow back on their own, given enough time. If anything, it was harder to take them off in the first place with bare hands.

Liara approached Jason's cloud house, still uncertain about following Shade's advice. The building was eerily impenetrable to even her formidable senses, which was a little unnerving. As she stood, staring at the door, the entire wall next to the door opened like the eye of some vast monster as it roused from slumber. Jason was inside, sitting in a chair with a book on astral theory in hand.

He was standing in a now-exposed parlour. Unlike the outside, which was disguised as a normal, if impressive, wooden building, the interior was very clearly made up of cloud-stuff. A side table formed of cloud-stuff and he rested the book on it. Shade emerged from Jason's shadow.

“Mr Asano, if you’re too lazy to get the door, I am happy to do so in your stead. We are being visited by a princess, not one of Miss Belinda’s herbal supplement suppliers. Please allow the household to demonstrate at least a moderate decorum.”

“And yet, you’re chiding me in front of company?”

“Doing so in private is demonstrably ineffective. I recognise that attempting to shame a famously shameless man may be an exercise in futility, but I endeavour, nonetheless.”

Jason shook his head turning his attention back to Liara.

“What brings you by, Princess? I had any new information, Shade would have told you already.”

“Shade didn’t tell you why I was coming?”

“He didn’t tell me you were coming at all. I have rules about privacy when Shade is inhabiting friendly shadows. I’m a strong believer in ethical lines, if only to stop myself from slipping further across them than I should.”

“May I come in?”

“If you wish, although I’ll give you a warning, first. If you come in here, you’ll be entering my domain. You won’t have the same power disparity over me you normally would. In fact, I could make things quite dangerous for you, should I be so inclined.”

“I’m familiar with cloud flasks,” Liara said.

“Mine has seen some modifications that go outside what is normally possible,” he warned her. “Be aware that if you step in here, you will, do a degree, come under my power. I know that’s not something you’re used to anymore, being a gold-ranker.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Then, by all means, be welcome in my home.”

He made a welcoming gesture and she stepped up to the open side of the building. The instant she felt an aura from inside the building she flinched and froze in place, her instincts screaming danger. She blasted out her senses but the building remained uncannily impenetrable, even with the open wall. All she could sense from it was the barest touch on an aura she knew she would have to go inside to properly examine.

Soramir had never told Liara what he had seen in Jason’s aura, but the way Soramir treated him once they had met was extremely telling. Something had earned the respect and, she suspected, even the wariness of the Storm Kingdom’s first and most powerful ancestor. Hoping she was about to realise at least a part of what he had seen, Liara continued into the cloud house.