

Chapter 117: Six-Month Lease

The arrival of the expedition was a mix of welcome, relief, commiseration and loss. Rufus and Gary waded into the chaos while Vincent headed for the administration building and the immense amount of work about to be dumped on him. Lacking anything else to do, Sophie trailed along behind Jason to the marshalling yard.

They found the Gellers, Rufus and Gary moving to talk to Danielle. With the arrival at the marshalling yard, her job as expedition leader was finally over. The strain was showing, even through the vitality of silver rank. As Rufus and Gary greeted her, Jason sought out the iron-rank Gellers. He met a tired-looking Humphrey with a broad smile and a warm handshake.

“Welcome home, mate; glad you made it. It was a bit touch-and-go there, from what I hear. Sorry I wasn’t there to help.”

“I’m not,” Humphrey said. “I’m glad you didn’t have to go through it. Life and death were separated by not much more than luck. Everyone lost people and we were no exception.”

Jason knew a lot of the iron-rank Gellers by sight, and some familiar faces were missing. The one he knew best was Henry Geller, who he had fought in their now-infamous mirage chamber clash.

Rick Geller came up and shook Jason by the hand.

“I want to thank you,” he said. “What you did to us in the mirage chamber; we were better prepared for when things went truly wrong. We had lived with the idea of losing people and still moving forward. It was worse for real; so much worse. We held it together, though, even after losing people. You helped us get ready for that.”

Claire Adeah was one of the two elf sisters on Ricks team. Of them all, she had resented Jason’s actions in their mock battle the most. She stepped up next to Rick and offered Jason her hand and he shook it.

“Rick’s right,” she said. “I didn’t like what you did, back then, but it was nothing next to the real thing.”

“I’d like to say that was my intention,” Jason said. “Honestly, though, I was just looking for a way to win.”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Rick said. “You helped us stay alive when we might not have otherwise.”

“No, that’s on you,” Jason said. “You got as many people as you could out of there when much stronger adventurers were dying.”

Rick nodded.

“We heard about your friend,” he said. “You should look around you, right now. A lot of these people wouldn’t be here if she hadn’t bought them the time to survive.”

Jason looked around, seeing the faces of strangers.

“I’d trade them all to get her back,” he said. “Does that make me a bad person?”

“It makes you someone lying to yourself,” a voice came from behind him. He turned as Cassandra fell into his embrace.

“If you really had the choice,” she whispered into his ear, “you’d let her save those people.”

“It doesn’t feel like that,” he whispered back.

They drew apart, their hands held together between them.

“How did your family come out?” he asked. “How’s your brother?”

“We lost people, but not many as some. Thadwick woke up on the way back. He’s... different.”

“Coming that close to death can change you,” Jason said.

She nodded.

“It’s like he’s finally seen how empty all the nonsense he built up around himself is. How much all the things he cared about were just worthless bluster in the face of real power. I think this will be good for him, in the end.”

“We should take what good we can from all this mess,” Jason said.

“I do have one question,” Cassandra said with a sweet, tired smile.

“What’s that?”

“Why is that very attractive young woman staring at us?”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Jason said innocently.

“No?” Cassandra asked, turning her head to examine Sophie. “You didn’t notice the extremely pretty woman with the silver hair and the tracking bracelet.”

“Oh, her.”

“Yes, her.”

“She’s new.”

“Yes, I imagine I would have spotted her before. She stands out.”

“You don’t need to bother about her.”

“Don’t I, now?”

“Not at all. That’s just my nubile slave girl.”

“WHAT?” came Sophie and Cassandra’s simultaneous exclamation, to a backdrop of Jason’s wild cackling as a gaggle of people started talking over one another.

“I’m not a slave!”

“You have some serious explaining to do, Asano!”

“Jason, I think you’re my hero now.”

“What I have can’t be taught, Rick.”

“Just try treating me like a slave I will drown you in your own...”

“HEY!”

Rufus’ booming voice cut through the noise as he marched over.

“What is going on here?” he asked. “Jason, what did you do?”

“Why do you assume it was me?”

“Was it you?”

“Well, yes, but where’s the faith?”

“What were you thinking, causing a commotion here?”

“I thought people could use some normalcy,” Jason said. “What’s more normal than two women fighting over a sexy man?”

“You can have him,” Cassandra told Sophie.

“Don’t want him; you can keep him.”

“That’s hurtful,” Jason said, looking between the two.

“Jason, this isn’t the time for your nonsense,” Rufus said.

“Rufus, this is exactly the time. There will be days and days of mourning the lost.

These people just got home safe and they need just a few moments to celebrate surviving. A little laughter; a little joy. There won’t a lot of that for a while.”

“I don’t agree with you at all,” Rufus said, then sighed and gave him a sad smile.

“Farrah would have, though,” he said. “Just be respectful of people.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. He gave Rufus a rare, earnest smile; a far cry from his usual ones where he looked like he was up to something. He turned to Cassandra.

“Do you have to go home, or do you have some time for a debonair gentleman caller?”

“Oh, you have some questions to answer,” she said. “You’ll be answering them now.”

“I’m an open book,” Jason said. “Come along, slave girl.”

“I’m not your slave!”

“She’s a rental,” Jason said as they started extricating themselves from the busy marshalling yard. “Six-month lease.”

“You didn’t rent me!”

"I have a receipt."

"It's an indenture contract."

"Why do you even have an indentured servant?" Cassandra asked.

"Well, you know how you said I should catch that thief?"

Cassandra looked over at Sophie.

"That was you?"

"It was," Sophie said unhappily.

"Frankly, I'm surprised he caught you."

"It was his friend who figured out how to ambush us."

"It was a team effort," Jason said. "And since I was team leader, the credit is primarily mine."

"What team?" Sophie asked. "There were only two of you."

"Senior partner, then."

"Does Standish know you were the senior partner?"

"I think he intuited it," Jason said.

"I think you're full of crap," Sophie said.

"I like her," Cassandra said. "But how did she end up indentured to you?"

"Ah," Jason said. "That is a tale of vicious crime lords, shady politicians and a handsome adventurer, generous of spirit..."

Rick Geller watched Jason saunter off, shamelessly boasting to a pair of beautiful women.

"I want to be just like him," he said wistfully, then received a hard thump on the arm. He yelped, turning to see, Claire had been the one to hit him.

"What was that for?"

"The man is infuriating," Sophie said. She was back in her shared suite with Belinda. They were standing at the terrace rail, enjoying the cool ocean breeze.

"How so?" Belinda asked.

"He keeps calling me a slave."

"Does he treat you like a slave?"

"That's not the point."

"It really is," Belinda said.

"He called me a nubile slave girl."

Belinda burst out laughing.

"That is not funny!"

"You're complaining about being called a slave while you live like a princess, complete with enchanted castle."

"Yeah, well... you don't know what he's up to."

"You're right," Belinda said. "He didn't want you around after the indenture hearing?"

"He's down the hall with his upper-class lover. I'm not sticking around for that, whatever the terms of indenture are."

"He has a lady friend? What's she like?"

"She's a Mercer. Main family too; not one of the branches. Obnoxiously good-looking."

Belinda groaned.

"I know what the pretty ones are like to deal with," she complained.

"She seems alright. Wait, was that directed at me?"

"It makes sense that she's a big nob," Belinda said, ignoring Sophie's question. "Look at the company Asano keeps."

"What's his background?" Sophie asked. "What have you managed to dig out of Standish?"

"A job offer, actually. Clive asked me to come work with him. Assuming that all this political stuff gets settled."

"What does he want you to do?"

"Be a research assistant, which I'm pretty sure means taking care of all the mundane stuff he doesn't have time for. He's expecting to be very busy, soon."

"Are you sure he isn't looking for something more intimate?"

"He had a thing for that friend of Asano's who died. He's not hiding it very well, just throwing himself into his work."

"Are you going to take the job?"

"Of course. In the Magic Society, I can learn more about that Lamprey guy. Asano might think he has all this handled, but I doubt we've heard the end of it."

"What did you get from Standish about Asano?"

"According to Clive," Belinda said, "Jason isn't even from this world."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, you know the world?" Belinda asked.

"Of course I know the world," Sophie said. "It's a big round thing. We're standing on it."

"Actually, we're standing on the cloud palace."

“And the cloud palace is sitting on the world. By your reasoning, you aren’t standing on the ground if you’re wearing shoes.”

“That’s actually a good point,” Belinda conceded with a frown.

“You don’t need to sound surprised,” Sophie said.

“Sorry,” Belinda said. “What were we talking about? Right, the world. Generally, you think about the world as being everything, right?”

“But you’re saying it isn’t.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Asano comes from a whole other world that’s apparently out there.”

“A whole different world,” Sophie mused.

“Yes,” Belinda said. “Uh, but no.”

“What?”

“Well, it’s a different world. Except, it’s the same world. But different. It’s complicated.”

“I can tell by the fact that the only part of that I could follow was that the rest of it was complicated. You said he came from another world.”

“Yes.”

“But then you said that this different world is the same world.”

“No. Except, yes. They’re different versions of the same world. Like when we helped Donzo with the fake spirit coin racket.”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into that. You’re saying Asano comes from a counterfeit world?”

“No, both worlds are real.”

“Then it’s not a terrific comparison.”

Belinda glared at Sophie.

“Maybe if you ever read a book that went three pages without the phrase ‘glistening thighs,’ I wouldn’t have to dumb it down so much.”

“Oh, so I should have been reading all that boring nonsense you collect in case I ever became the nubile slave girl of some guy from a world knocked out by some godly equivalent of Donzo making fake money in his bathtub?”

“Exactly,” Belinda said.

They looked at each other and both erupted into laughter. They wandered into the lounge area and crashed down together on a couch.

“How is this our life?” Belinda asked, reclining back into the soft, cloudy furniture. “It’s like things kept getting worse and worse, until they so bad they came right around the other end to amazing and we somehow live in a magic palace, now.”

“This is just temporary. We need to be ready for what comes next.”

“What comes next is you getting amazing magical powers,” Belinda said. “You know I blame you for all this.”

“How is this my fault? Also, you just said this is amazing.”

“If you shaved off all that shiny, silver hair, you might not get creepy guys chasing after you.”

“You want me to run around bald?”

“You could wear a wig to cover it up,” Belinda said. “It would have to be an ugly one, though, or it would defeat the purpose. Bald would be best, thinking about it.”

“I’ll do it if you do,” Sophie said.

“And give up these natural curls? No thank you.”

The room chime rang and Belinda went and pressed the gold patch on the wall that turned the door translucent. On the other side was Jason.

“If you’d like to come with me, ladies.”

“What happened to your lady friend?” Belinda asked.

“She only just got back and has her own responsibilities. Our reunion was short but sweet.”

“Stamina issues?” Sophie asked, walking up behind Belinda.

“My stamina is just fine,” Jason said defensively.

“Sure it is,” Sophie said.

“I’m perfectly virile, thank you very much.”

“Where do you want us to go, exactly?” Belinda asked.

“I have assembled a panel of seasoned adventurers for advice and a catalogue of goods that are available – and affordable – from the brokers at the trade hall. It’s time for your friend to choose her essences.”