

Chapter 465

I've Seen Your Best

Farrah paused from her explanation of what Jason could expect from their destination once the cloud ship cleared the storm. In only a few moments they went from blasting horizontal rain and mountainous wave crests to calm seas and blue skies. They went out onto the deck of the boat to take a look, leaning against the railing as a cool ocean breeze pleasantly offset the warm air.

Behind the yacht, the edge of the storm just stopped, as if trapped behind glass. Even the seas swiftly calmed beyond the boundary, massive waves dwindling to nothing in a boat length. All around was a bright sky and gorgeous turquoise water, the air undisturbed by the storm raging only hundreds of metres away.

"This doesn't seem natural," Jason said.

"And what's natural?" Farrah asked. "This isn't Earth, Jason. Our magic doesn't come in discrete bubbles. If there isn't something strange and magical going on, people start investigating. Remember the expedition where I died? That started because magic water stopped turning up in the middle of the desert."

"Oh, yeah. I'm still getting into that magic mindset."

He flashed her a grin.

"It's good to be back."

Jason and Farrah moved to a pair of loungers on the open deck with an awning to shield them from the bright sun. As they relaxed, Farrah continued preparing Jason for their destination.

"Adventuring culture in Rimaros," Farrah, said, "is a little bit notorious."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"They're obsessed with extreme specialisation."

"Isn't overspecialisation bad?"

"Yes," Farrah said. "For one thing, it's tricky, expensive and unreliable. When you're picking up essence abilities, your power set tries to round itself out. Some people are more specialised than others but the abilities you gain as you fill out your set will naturally cover your weaknesses to some degree. If you want to get around that, you have to very carefully choose your essences and awakening stones and the order in which you use them. The Magic Society in Rimaros has been at the forefront of gaming essence ability acquisition for decades. Centuries, maybe; you'd have to ask Clive."

“But there are no guarantees, are there?”

“Just the opposite; it can go very wrong. You remember when I was first teaching you aura manipulation and I told you about high-rankers with no aura power?”

“Sure. You end up hurting normal-rank people because your aura is powerful and uncontrolled.”

“Most of those stories come from Rimaros. You have to severely interfere with your ability acquisition to avoid aura powers and perception powers.”

“But in Rimaros, that’s what they do?”

“Exactly. They aren’t trying to avoid aura powers, because that’s idiotic, but sometimes things go wrong. And because the people with the money and connections to attempt this are from the top end of town, the failures still frequently get resourced enough to reach high rank. Usually through cores.”

“What’s so worth all that cost and effort and risk?” Jason asked.

“It’s the idea of being the very best at something. Look at you, for example. You’re an affliction specialist, except in Rimaros, you aren’t. There, with your stealth, utility, mobility and summoning powers, you’re a generalist. In Rimaros, there are no focused or wide area affliction specialists. There are only affliction specialists and dabblers. Every power that doesn’t either inflict or interact with afflictions is a mark that you aren’t good enough.”

“That’s bollocks. What about diminishing returns? Barely more than half my powers are affliction abilities and it’s already a highly synergistic power set. Trading in everything else for more powers would just add lots of bugging about. Maybe an extra power or two to round out my weak spots, but ranking up is doing that just fine. Every ability I gave up would cost me more than whatever minimal power bump I got from another affliction power replacing it.”

“For people in Rimaros, that minimal power bump is enough to trade off the rest. Because then they’re the best at what they do.”

“So is Wolverine and he sucks. Magneto can just make him keep stabbing himself in the plums, only for them to grow back so can do it again.”

“Yeah, I don’t like Wolverine,” Farrah agreed. “Hugh Jackman was so much sexier in Kate and Leopold.”

“I know, right?” Jason said. “The way that man talks about butter. I mean, bloody hell. What were we talking about?”

“Diminishing returns.”

“Right, yes. My power set brings a lot of assets to a team. This super affliction guy you’re talking about would need a whole team around him to be viable at all.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Farrah said. “That kind of overspecialisation isn’t practical on a wide scale. It’s the people with the strongest backgrounds who get that level of attention and care, which is only a small portion of adventurers. The most prestigious teams will have one extreme specialist, with the entire team built around capitalising on their specialisation, whatever that might be.”

“I’ve seen the same strat in video games,” Jason said. “It can be powerful, but you put a crack in that egg and the whole thing can fall apart.”

“I’m not arguing,” Farrah said. “Despite the sketchy basis for your tactical thinking, I agree that it’s a terrible approach. It’s building a strategy around everything going right when being an adventurer is about everything is going wrong. It’s not like the Adventure Society doesn’t understand that, though. The majority of Rimaros adventurers are no different from you or I. The reason I’m telling you all this isn’t because it’ll have a big impact on who we might work with. Those Rimaros elites won’t have anything to do with the likes of us.”

“You’re telling me because of attitudes.”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “You need to be aware that while not many adventurers in Rimaros will be specialised like that, it permeates their thinking and values. You will be judged based on your level of specialisation. You can overcome that with performance, of course.”

“Which is another reason not to stand out,” Jason said. “If someone perceived as a generalist starts doing well, I’m willing to bet a certain section of the adventuring community will start paying some unwelcome and unfriendly attention.”

“I don’t know, but it makes sense,” Farrah said. “I’ve never actually been there; this is all second-hand information. Just don’t go off on any of your ‘here’s why everyone but me is wrong’ speeches.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Could you strive for my best?” Farrah asked. “It’s just that, you know... I’ve seen your best.”

“Are you feeling that?” Jason asked, sitting up in his lounge. “Something’s going on with the ambient magic.”

Farrah concentrated, making her magic senses as delicate as possible. The strength of Jason’s soul didn’t advantage his magic senses as much as his aura senses but it did still improve them. His unusual nature of being both a physical and spiritual entity also increased his sensitivity to magic, especially astral magic.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “What is that?”

Farrah was also an outworlder, and while not as sensitive to astral forces as Jason, still had an astral affinity that helped her detect the disturbance in the magic around them.

“Astral energy is seeping through the dimensional membrane and starting to raise the magical saturation,” he said. “More magic is coming in and the monster surge is starting.”

Unlike Jason’s team, who had found themselves next to an abnormal manifestation, the ambient magic around Jason and Farrah was not as heavily disturbed. They shared a look, knowing that they had been the ones to trigger the events that would lead to a lot of death and destruction.

“It was going to happen, one way or another,” Farrah said. “If it had taken longer, the surge would be even worse. We actually made things better by starting it off, even if it doesn’t feel that way.”

“I know,” Jason said giving her a sad smile. “I have enough regrets that I don’t need to borrow ones I didn’t earn.”

“It should still be a while before the magical saturation starts causing manifestations,” Farrah said. “We should get to Rimaros before things start going wild.”

The first sign of civilisation that Jason and Farrah encountered were windmills the size of eight-storey buildings, standing on rocks jutting out of the sea. They were spaced out, roughly half a kilometre apart, in a line stretching out into the distance.

“Storm accumulators,” Farrah said. “They drain magical energy from storms, which causes them to collapse before reaching population centres. Anywhere big enough uses them not just to shield the towns and cities but also fuel the magic infrastructure. It turns what should make it incredibly hard to live here into a massive asset.”

“What about places that aren’t big enough to have these things?” Jason asked.

“Not sure,” Farrah said. “I was mostly interested in the accumulators themselves because that kind of wide-area array magic is exactly my field. These things run in a twenty-kilometre ring around Rimaros, so we’re getting close. I’d love to get a closer look at one, but I’ll need to get permission. The protection on these things is no joke.”

“I suppose they’d have to build their towns as shelters,” Jason said. “Lots of basements and the like.”

“Don’t expect to see that here,” Farrah said, pointing. “This is Rimaros, the city of islands.”

Jason’s gaze tracked where she was pointing to a point in the sky. Courtesy of his silver-rank visual acuity he could make out an island floating in the sky. Nestled amongst

tropical plants atop it was a small village. The underside of the island was a smoothly carved curve of stone, with two holes in the middle. A thick stream of water was spilling down from one hole, while the other had a stream rising from below to enter the island.

“That’s pretty neat,” Jason said.

“Neat?” Farrah asked. “It’s a flying island.”

“I’m not saying it’s not great,” Jason said. “I definitely want to take a look for myself but I own two interconnected pocket-universe cities. My bar for amazement has shifted up a little.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

“So, you said the city of islands, meaning there’s more of those?”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “Rimaros covers a huge area based around three islands that hold the majority of the population. Those with enough money and power live on artificial islands, which can hold anything from a single estate to a small town. Some of them are in the water, which are for merchants and the like with money but limited connections. Also, adventurers in the silver-rank range who don’t have strong backing and are just starting to make their way.”

As the boat moved forward, they spotted more of the sky islands.

“The flying islands are for the cream of society, as you’d expect,” Farrah continued. “Big name adventurers, long-standing adventuring families and aristocrats, which are usually the same thing. Any family that becomes known for producing good adventurers usually finds itself inducted into the nobility. Any noble house without some good adventurers will find itself falling into obscurity sooner or later.”

“Where do the Magic Society and Adventure Society fit in?” Jason asked.

“The Magic Society has the second-largest sky island in Rimaros, right after the royal palace. The Storm King is a gold-ranker, which you have to be before they’ll let you take the throne. Most nations shield their royalty and bring them up with cores, but that disqualifies you from becoming monarch here. All the potential heirs from every branch of the royal family are adventurers trying to prove themselves. Not just in monster fighting but statecraft, diplomacy, administration. It’s a decades-long contest until the current monarch is satisfied, chooses an heir and steps down.”

“So, the Hurricane Princess is just one of many.”

“Yes, although the designated frontrunners are always the children of the current monarch. The Hurricane Princess is the title given to the firstborn daughter and the Storm Prince to the firstborn son. At least, the firstborn ones that are competing. Many royals

bow out from the start, preferring to be adventurers or magical researchers or join a church.”

“They aren’t looked down on for that?”

“Not so long as whatever they do, they excel. There’s no shortage of people vying for the crown, so any path that brings prestige to the royal house is acceptable.”

“And whoever wins, the king just steps down?”

“Or the queen, yes. Voluntary surrender of the throne is a cornerstone of their society. Besides, there are rumours of some diamond-rank ancestor quietly watching over things from behind who would step in if any of his descendants got power-hungry.”

“Sure,” Jason said, “but I bet every decent-sized country in the world has pretty much the same rumour.”

“Just about,” Farrah said with a laugh.

“I think we can happily stay out of that mess,” Jason said. “I don’t anticipate bumping into Zara.”

“Zara?”

“The Hurricane Princess.”

“Oh, it’s Zara, is it?”

“Come on, I met her twice.”

“Did you give her any baked goods?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Jason asked, avoiding Farrah’s gaze. Then he changed the subject.

“Hey, you didn’t talk about the Adventure Society,” Jason said.

“They’ve claimed what amount to dominion over one of the natural islands. They’re a largely independent district within Rimaros where all the shops and services for the rich and powerful are concentrated. They also have the main entertainment quarter, most of the magical trade and the second-largest skyship port.”

“Skyships?” Jason said, perking up. “I just remembered; this thing can fly. I’ve just never had it somewhere with enough magical density before. I’ll have to shrink the size for the flying form, but still.”

Jason hung his head. “I guess I’ll wait until we’re leaving. A regular boat is less attention-grabbing than a flying cloud boat.”

“Yes, it is,” Farrah said. “You’ll have plenty of time to play with your boat later.”

Jason blinked and then broke out in a happy grin.

“I will, won’t I? No Network alternately trying to kidnap me or leech off me. No gold-rankers hunting me down. Just good, old-fashioned adventuring.”