

Chapter 651

Mockery

The stasis cabin of the Carlos Crime Wagon was an adapted bunk room filled with stasis pods. Each pod contained an Order of Redeeming Light member, and Carlos regularly serviced the pods to make sure they were operating properly. Space being at a premium, it was a narrow cabin, making the maintenance work rather awkward.

Carlos grumbled under his breath as he worked. He'd been preparing for the next major step in his research, to which Jason was critical. That was the exact moment that Jason had chosen to wander off and test his aura techniques on any woman that hoveled into view. Now he'd gone off with his team on some ill-defined contract to find possibly nothing.

After finishing, Carlos left the cabin for the small washroom and was wiping pod gel off his hands when one of his assistants appeared at the door.

"Boss, that weird shadow guy is at the door."

"Show him in," Carlos told his assistant.

"He said you should come out."

Carlos grumbled as he made his way to the exit of the vehicle, through the hatch and down the metal stairs.

"What is it, Shade?" Carlos asked irritably.

"Mr Asano and his team have a question for you, Priest Quilido."

"Is it 'why did we go off on some pointless mission when we could be participating in world-changing research?'"

"No," Shade said. "It is not."

"Carlos," Jason said, projecting his voice through Shade's body. "Let me tell you about something I saw."

Jason explained what he'd seen in the town he scouted, from the heat-producing paint to the uniform mannerisms and strange heat signatures of the residents.

"What you're describing sounds like a heat-consuming parasite with a swarm hive mind," Carlos said. "I have a lot of research on creatures and objects that take people over in various ways, so I might be able to find something more specific."

"How long would that take?"

"A few hours. In the meantime, any information you could get from the auras of the people would help."

"Alright, I'll discuss it with the team."

With the skimmer floating in the rainforest canopy, Jason and his team sat and discussed their next move. As they went through various approaches, Jason pushed back against going in and scouting with his aura.

“You seem uncharacteristically nervous about using your aura,” Clive told him.

“Yeah,” Jason said as he absently nodded. “I’m grown accustomed to my aura being an absolute advantage. Something I can always rely on being the best at. Now I’m starkly aware that isn’t true and it makes me feel uneasy. I only caught a glimpse of the messenger, through Shade, and it still shook me. Even passively sensing the refinement of his aura through Shade’s senses spooked me.”

“You can’t let anxiety over someone being better at one thing stop you,” Humphrey told him.

“I know,” Jason said. “But I’ve also realised how much my aura powers have been a crutch. I need to prove that there’s more to me than that. To use every tool in the toolbox, before I forget how.”

“Good,” Rufus said. “That’s exactly what I taught you.”

Like Zara in Korinne’s team, Rufus was a late and temporary addition to Team Biscuit. He lacked experience working with the team and would eventually go back to his training centre in Greenstone.

Jason has a similar problem around teamwork, having been away for so long. Compared to Rufus, though, he still had the months in the Reaper’s astral space with the others. That time had welded the team into a cohesive unit. They still needed to kick off the rust and learn all the changes to each other’s powers, but those ingrained patterns were still there.

The team had spent good chunks of Jason’s convalescence going over their powers and formulating new strategies and tactics around them. Now they needed to get out in the field and use them.

“There’s another thing, though,” Jason said. “It’s been a while and we’ve barely worked together out in the field.”

“Someone got stomped and had to sit out most of the contracts,” Neil pointed out.

“I know,” Jason said. “I’m nervous about messing up. Making everything go wrong. And what if it isn’t like before? What if—”

“I’m not a big worshipper of the gods,” Sophie cut in. “But for the love of the gods, please shut up.”

“What?” Jason asked.

"We get it," she said. "You're in touch with your feelings, and that's great, but you are spending too much time with Rufus' mother."

"That's what I've been saying," Rufus said.

"For different reasons," Belinda told him. "Quiet you."

"Jason, there's been too much talking and too much thinking. That's always been an issue for you, but now it's reaching the point where you're getting in your own way. So here's what's going to happen. We're going to go to that town and you're going to look at the auras of all the creepy people. Then something is going to go wrong, they're all going to attack us and we're going to kick everyone's inside out. Everyone agrees with this plan."

"We do?" Neil asked, earning him a gentle elbow jab from Belinda.

"I'm not sure that's—" Clive began.

"*I said,*" Sophie cut him off, "Everyone agrees with this plan."

The group all turned to Humphrey, who was both team leader and Sophie's lover. He looked between Sophie and the rest of the team.

"Don't look at me," he said. "I heard everyone agrees with the plan."

"You know," Neil said, "Humphrey's mother is almost always right."

"What's she got to do with anything?" Humphrey asked.

"I was just thinking," Neil said. "Sophie may not always be right, but she'll punch people until they admit she is. She's kind of like a violent version of Humphrey's mother."

Humphrey's face was stricken with wide-eyed horror.

Jason was the only one to draw close to the town, again making use of the shade-houses and tree lines in the agricultural flatlands around it. The others waited in the edge of the rainforest for Jason to examine the town with his aura senses.

"I'm a little worried about Jason," Clive said. "It's not like him to be so hesitant."

"He's been anxious and fearful from the start," Rufus said. "Gary and I didn't see it at first, but Farrah saw through him. He's always had a knack for using aura masks, even before he knew what they were. It's like he tricks himself into becoming this outlandish person. Someone who can survive in the madness he always seems to find himself in."

"That persona is how he gets there in the first place," Neil said.

"Yes," Rufus said. "But I'm thankful for it. Jason's willingness to insert himself into a situation he could walk away from saved my life."

"It saved me from worse," Sophie added.

"We were low rank," Rufus said. "Our aura senses weren't as sharp as they are now and we didn't see through him. But Farrah trained his aura, and she saw how scared he

really was. How fragile. But after he came back from Earth, it's different. He can't – or maybe won't – hide his feelings. He lashes out like a cornered animal."

"He's getting better," Humphrey said. "But that wound is still there. I think he scared Emir."

"My mother likes to say that we can never go back to what we were," Rufus said. "The best we can do is try and decide who we'll be next."

"Talking to your mum is why everything takes so damn long," Sophie said. "How long does it take to aura scout one small town? It's barely more than a village. I think Jason may have missed the key element of the plan."

"Which is you running in and punching people?" Neil asked.

"Exactly," she said. "Simple is best when it comes to plans. I learned that from Humphrey. His mum made him read lots of books about strategy written by people who went on to die in battle. It doesn't say a lot about the value of their books if you ask me."

"They didn't *all* die in battle."

"Actually, the women writers mostly seemed to live," Sophie mused.

"I bet it's a pride thing," Belinda said.

"It's not a pride thing," Humphrey asserted. "They were warriors. It makes sense that they died in battle."

"I'm with Lindy," Clive said. "I never understood the whole male pride thing. Seems like a good way to get yourself killed for stupid reasons."

"Yep," Belinda agreed as she and Sophie nodded.

"Speaking of the plan," Rufus said, "I think we should make some clarifications. Specifically regarding the kicking-out of people's insides. The people in this town are more likely victims than perpetrators."

"If they're full of heat-sucking parasites," Belinda said, "they're probably past saving."

"That's most likely the case," Clive sadly agreed.

"We'll know more once Jason is done," Humphrey said.

"If he ever is," Sophie complained.

"Give him time," Humphrey said. "He said that technique takes a long time to use properly. I know Jason can be a bit frivolous, but you heard him earlier. I'm sure he's completely focused on the task at hand."

"That was a good sandwich," Jason mumbled as he sucked sauce off his fingers. "I need to find out what was in that sauce."

"Mr Asano," Shade said.

"I have to say, I'm loving how the elves around here do food. Sweet drinks and spicy tucker."

"Mr Asano."

"I wonder what they use to make bread. It's not wheat, and it's not what they used in Rimaros, either."

"Mr Asano, Miss Wexler is rapidly shifting from impatient to violently impatient."

"This technique takes time," he said. "I have to slowly and carefully expand my senses unless I want people to notice my aura immediately. Even then, I'm still learning. I'm certain that's how Benella and her rental henchmen found me at the park."

"Rental henchmen?"

"I can only assume that's what they were."

"Why would that be the only possible assumption?"

"There's no other reasonable explanation for how she ended up with flunkies."

"We spied on people who confirmed they were working together."

"That kind of thing is easily misinterpreted."

"I cannot imagine why your team would worry that you aren't giving this task you're your focus."

"Because I ate one sandwich? I don't need my hands or my mouth to expand my aura."

"But you do need concentration, Mr Asano."

"And a sandwich helps me get into a balanced state of mind. Nagging does not, by the way."

Despite his teasing of Shade, Jason had, indeed, been slowly and carefully expanding his senses into the town from his hiding place in a shrubbery on the outskirts. He was taking it even slower than he had while practising, in the hope of going undetected. This approach bore fruit as Jason extended his aura senses over the closest of the townsfolk as they walked by. They showed no reaction to his aura but, despite going unnoticed, Jason's expression filled with sadness and rage.

"I got a closer look at one of the elves," Jason told the team through voice chat. "I don't think there's any rescuing them. They have a death aura with some kind of swarm aura inside them. I'm fairly certain they're walking corpses filled with parasites."

"Can you get any more details?" Clive asked. "Anything you can pick up will help Carlos identify what we're dealing with. Maybe even find a weakness we can exploit, or at least get a sense if whatever this is could be widespread enough to cover the southern region."

“I’m looking,” Jason said. “Slow and careful, though, so give me some more time.”

Even Sophie didn’t complain at that, after the revelation that everyone in the town was dead.

Jason continued expanding his senses, examining the auras of other parasitised residents. Comparing them, he felt a familiar sensation from them, but only passingly so. It teased at his mind until he finally realised what it was: all of these people had creatures living inside them.

Unlike Jason’s symbiotic relationship with Colin, these were parasites. They took and gave nothing back. In Jason’s mind, Colin had given him far more than Jason had ever returned. Colin had kept him alive time and time again, not just staving off death but healing him up enough to keep fighting when he would have fallen.

When the Builder’s star seed tried to take over Jason’s body, Shade and Gordon had been banished back to the astral, their vessels destroyed. It was Colin who slowed the star seed as it claimed Jason’s body, helping him to hold on. It was Colin, nestled inside Jason’s soul, who offered support in his darkest moments. Without Colin, Jason would be dead or a slave.

The creatures that had taken the people of the town, both killing and enslaving them, were a mockery of what Colin and Jason shared. It filled him with a burning desire to go on a rampage, digging the parasites out of the townsfolk and annihilating every last one. He didn’t, but his fury flowed out through his aura, disrupting his partially mastered aura-hiding technique and alerting the town. As one, every elf in it through back their heads and let out an inhuman screech.