

## Chapter 89: Anti-Pirate Operations

Cassandra Mercer awoke to the sound of crockery and cutlery being laid out in the next room. She swung her legs out of bed and got up, stretching. She didn't want to put on fresh clothes before she had a shower, so she put on the only article of clothing she could see at a glance; Jason's shirt she had tossed aside the night before.

She stepped out onto the balcony to look out on the guild district street, busy with early morning traffic. Her normal routine was to start the day with physical training, but with the sand barge expedition, she would get exercise enough.

"Morning," Jason said, carrying a large tray onto the balcony, pausing to take in the sight of her leaning against the balcony rail in his shirt. Her delicate features were fresh-faced, despite having just woken up. Her long, dark hair was slightly mussed, which somehow was all the more appealing. A pair of toned, athletic legs emerged from the bottom of his shirt. She turned to give him an inquisitive look and he set out breakfast on the table under the shade awning.

"This is what you look like first thing in the morning?" he asked unhappily as they sat. "You realise the rest of us don't look that good even when we try our best?"

"I didn't hear you get up," she said, ignoring his question. "Are you an expert at sneaking out of bed in the morning?"

"Breakfast the next morning is my signature move," Jason said. "It's how I convince people they haven't made a horrible mistake."

He started lifting the covers off the trays he had laid out on the table, introducing them one by one.

"Scrambled egg hash brown nests; stewed apple oatmeal; cream cheese pancake balls with butter and syrup."

She picked out a pancake ball and bit into it. Her little moan of pleasure crawled into Jason's ear and gave his hind-brain a coquettish wave.

"Just keep bringing the pleasure?" she asked.

"That's the basic idea," Jason said.

"And how many people have you tried this signature move on exactly?" she asked, teasingly. "Am I not the first girl to visit the Asano lodgings?"

"You're the first woman," he said. "Girls don't interest me."

She let out a low, sultry laugh.

"You really are good at people, aren't you?"

"I have my moments," he said.

"How about back in your world?" she asked.

"Nothing you haven't heard before," Jason said. "Heart-shattering first love, followed by a series of empty, self-pitying encounters. A few real relationships, here and there, but I didn't leave anyone behind, if that's what you're asking."

She smiled, finishing off the pancake ball and reaching for one of the hash brown nests. He poured two glasses of spiced milk from a pitcher. They took to the food, conversing in glances as they ate.

"You're not going to ask after my sordid past?" she asked.

"You're here now," Jason said. "I don't see how the rest matters."

She tilted her head, considering him, curiously.

"I'm still trying to unravel you, Jason Asano."

"I'm not going anywhere," Jason said, then glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Actually, not true," he said. "We have to be at the marshalling yard in about an hour and a half. I should jump in the shower."

"Oh," she said with a smile, "I think we can figure out something much better to do in the shower than jump."

\*\*\*

The Adventure Society campus was only a short walk from Jason's lodgings, so they walked in the late-morning sunshine. She had her adventuring gear in her storage space, so she didn't need to detour home. There were around two-dozen people assembled for the expedition, and they were not the last to appear. Their arrival at the marshalling yard together did not go unnoticed. Cassandra went off to speak with friends, while Jason headed for a clump of Gellers. Cassandra's gently brushing over his arm as they parted likewise caught the attention of prying eyes.

Jason walked across the marshalling yard under the unhappy glare of several young men. He felt several bronze-rank auras press rudely down on him, but ignored them as he greeted Humphrey, Phoebe and Gabrielle, the acolyte of knowledge. Others he recognised from his time in the mirage arena.

"I think you just made a lot of enemies," Phoebe said. "Do you know how many of the bronze-rankers have designs on her?"

"You can't live your life afraid of who won't like you," Jason said. "Speaking of which..."

Rick Geller and his team joined them. They exchanged greetings, although the healer, Claire, was giving Jason a spiteful look. Her twin, Hannah, cast a gaze in the

direction of Cassandra Mercer, who was chatting with her own friends. Cassandra glanced their way, eyes twinkling, then turned back to her own group.

The big man, Jonah, had squared himself in front of Jason.

"I have to admit," Jonah said, "you can fight. You know we would have pasted you in seconds on open ground, though, right?"

"That's hardly an incentive to fight on open ground then, is it?" Jason asked. Jonah let out a boisterous laugh, slapping Jason on the shoulder.

"That's a pretty good point," Jonah acknowledged. "How do you think you'll do on open sand, though? Sand pirates sound like a lot more fun than yet another bog monster, but it doesn't seem like your kind of terrain."

"Oh, I imagine I'll muddle through," Jason said.

"Jason took out two skimmers full of them," Humphrey said.

"I took one," Jason said. "My familiar took the other. I was pretty pleased with myself until I saw the aftermath of what Humphrey did. He halfway buried a skimmer with the pirates still in it. One swing of his sword."

"Everyone will get their chance today," Ernest Geller said, approaching the group. He had been in charge of their expedition when they first encountered the sand pirates, but today he was just one of the crowd. There were a couple of other bronze-rank family members with his as they joined the assembled Gellers and exchanged greetings.

"Hey, it's Mose," Jason said, spotting another member of their last expedition. "He's with his cousin; I might go say g'day."

"You know Beth Cavendish?" Humphrey asked.

"We've met," Jason said. "You know her?"

"When people talk about the potential of iron-rankers," Phoebe said, "she's the reason Humphrey comes in at number two. She leads her own team; all locals, unlike us."

"Good to know," Jason said, heading over. "I'll say g'day for you too, Humphrey."

\*\*\*

The huge expedition had more than forty people. They were divided into teams of six iron-rankers, plus one bronze-ranker per team. Leading the expedition was a silver-ranker, an elf from the Cavendish family, plus Vincent as the Adventure Society representative.

Once the groups were organised, the plan was explained. What they had been calling the sand pirates, after their attack on the spirit coin convoy, were actually the Ustei Tribe, a group of nomads from a region to the north. The expedition was a show of strength, to bring the tribe into negotiations.

The best outcome was to peacefully convince the Ustei to either return north or agree not to attack any further spirit coin convoys. Failing that, they were to be captured by force and brought to the city for interrogation on what had brought them south in the first place.

A train of magically-powered carriages took the expedition to the edge of the delta, where each team boarded one of a half-dozen prepared sand skimmers. Jason spotted Clive, tapped as one of the skimmer pilots for another team.

Jason was placed in a group with the four members of Beth Cavendish's team, plus her cousin, Mose. Leading them was a bronze-ranker Jason didn't know but guessed to be from one of the lesser families in Greenstone. He was only twenty or twenty-one, and was eager to defer to Beth.

One of the members of Beth's team was a huge human named Hudson. He looked like Humphrey with twenty percent bonus person, to the point of being almost as large as Gary.

They boarded their skimmer and set off. They sailed over the sand, rushing through the scorched, desert air. Jason noticed the huge man looking at him.

"Something I can help you with?" Jason asked him.

"Aren't you that guy with the evil powers?" Hudson asked. "The one from the recording?"

Jason sighed.

"That's me," he said.

"You don't seem evil," Hudson told him.

"Then you have to ask yourself," Jason said. "Was I pretending to be evil then, or am I pretending to not be evil, now?"

"Which is it?" Hudson asked.

"Finding out would probably cost you more than you're willing to pay," said Niko, another member of Beth's team. Niko was a smoulder, a race Jason had only met a few of. They had dark skin, glowing red eyes and jet-black hair. All he really knew about them was that they had powerful earth and fire affinities, and that in spite of their sinister appearance, the few he had met were quite easygoing.

\*\*\*

The skimmers paused to meet up with an adventurer assigned to keep track of the Ustei sand barge. He was a bronze ranker with the sand essence, completely at home out in the desert. He could move over the sands faster than a skimmer.

“As instructed, I didn’t hide that I was watching them,” the adventurer told the expedition leader. “They tried chasing me off a few times, but didn’t have anyone that could outpace me.”

"Any indication they'd be willing to talk to us, or do you think they'll attack on sight?" the expedition leader asked.

“Well, they might have been chasing me out of the desperate desire to have a nice chat,” the adventurer said. “I didn’t stick around to find out.”

“From what we know of the Ustei,” Vincent said, “so long as we show strength, they should be willing to talk.”

“I wouldn’t go into this expecting to come out unbloodied,” the expedition leader said.

“All we can do is our best,” Vincent said.

\*\*\*

A ballista bolt from the sand barge penetrated the canvas canopy on the sand skimmer, pinning Mose to the base.

“Negotiations went badly, it seems,” Niko said, pulling the bolt out of Mose. Blood came with it, but Beth was already chanting a spell.

*“Let the waters make whole that which has come to harm.”*

Water appeared in front on Mose, flowing into the wound. It washed away the blood to reveal clean, repaired skin. The skimmer came to a stop and Hudson jumped out. The big man knelt to the ground, both palms flat in the sand. Suddenly a wall surged out of the sand to shield them from any further attacks.

“This is our regroup point,” Beth said. “If you get turned around or isolated, or the fight goes badly, get back here. Otherwise, everyone use Jason’s ability to stay in contact.”

With Jason’s new party interface ability, the group could stay in voice contact, even in the midst of battle.

“We’re going to move on the sand barge,” Beth directed, completely disregarding their bronze-ranker. “Hudson, front and centre. Emily and Niko flank, me and Mose, in the middle. Jason, you’re our roaming scout. If there’s any group looking organised and heading in our direction, warn us and sow some chaos. Is that something you can handle?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Beth turned to the bronze-ranker.

“You, uh... Clarence, was it?”

“Terrence,” the man said.

“You bring up the rear and keep a clear extraction path,” Beth instructed. “Losing is acceptable; failing to escape is not.”

They moved around the wall, The huge body of Hudson in the lead. As he moved, his body transformed from flesh to sandstone, which didn't slow him down at all. All around them, the other skimmers had come to a stop and the groups were moving on the sand barge, which had likewise pulled to a halt. People were pouring out of it by the dozen, charging wildly as they raised their weapons in the air.

Jason noticed some of the groups on his side were more organised than others. The two groups made up mostly of Gellers were moving in formation, much like Beth's team. Others seemed no better organised than the whooping Ustei charging in their direction. These less-controlled adventurers were already launching arrows, spears and bolts of magic, to limited effect with the groups were still at a distance.

Behind the charging Ustei, small but fast-firing ballistae were going to work. A bolt came sailing out of the air, only to be intercepted by an arrow shot by Emily, the archer from Beth's team. She was a celestine, with fair skin and golden eyes that matched her pixie-cut hair. She easily picked out the approaching bolt and fired an arrow that exploded on contact.

- 
- You are in the area of an ally's [Invincible] aura. You have increased damage reduction against normal and iron-rank damage sources.
  - You are in the area of an ally's [Life-Bringer] aura. You recover health-over-time and healing abilities used on you are more effective.
- 

Jason unleashed his own aura as his cloak of night appeared around him. Looking ahead, Ustei were charging at them in clusters.

“Watch your balance,” Hudson warned, and a large, flat block of sandstone rose from the sand under the team's feet. It started carrying them forward like a quick-moving raft.

Jason looked forward to the Ustei drawing closer.

“Sow some chaos, yeah?” he said to Beth.

“If you're up to it,” she said.

“I'll take a gander and see what I can do,” he said.

He took one of the throwing needles from the bandolier on his chest; one identified by a black cord. He pulled his arm back and tossed it in a long arc to land amongst the Ustei, engulfing a patch of them in a sphere of shadow. Jason stepped into Beth's shadow, falling through it like it was a hole in the ground. Shortly after, the group heard screaming mixed into the battle cries of the Ustei.