

Chapter 868

Things More Intimate

In the wake of Jason's departure, Team Biscuit had taken a break in Vitesse before going on an intense contract-taking spree, pushing themselves through silver-rank as fast as they could. After the monster surge and the subterranean expedition, taking ordinary contracts like normal adventurers was almost a vacation in itself.

The Messenger War was over in Yaresh, at least until some other astral king decided the region was of interest. Around the world, however, the messenger invasion continued unabated. Where Yaresh had seen one rogue astral king seeking out a soul forge for their own ends, the other astral kings moved with singular purpose. They were determined to search every nook and cranny of Pallimustus until they found the artefact left behind by the god of Purity.

Team Biscuit fought messengers on and off, but were not focused on the interdimensional interlopers. Monsters didn't stop spawning just because of the messengers, and the invasion made it easy for regular monster hunting work to fall through the cracks. The team found a niche in clearing out the contracts that otherwise fell by the wayside.

After two years, though, it was time for a break. Clive had more projects than time to do them, and the others split up for personal pursuits. For Neil, it was a return to Greenstone where the team would eventually reunite. It was a chance to visit family and check in on Nik, who was training at the Geller Estate.

Being normal-rank when even silvers and golds were helpless in the face of gods and demigods had left Nik feeling vulnerable and weak. His only ability to act was with the borrowed power of the elemental spires that placed a network of magical systems at his command.

When Nik chose his essences, it was that feeling of being at the centre of something powerful he was trying to recapture. He did not want borrowed strength, however, the way it had been in the transformation zone. He was determined that the power at his command would be his own, something no one could take away or deny from him.

Nik's essence combination was actually one from Earth, using an essence brought back by Jason. Jason had left the bulk of his essence stores with his family, but had brought a few with him. This included the technology essence, knowing it would fascinate Clive. Nik had used that essence, along with the myriad and vast essences to create the

network confluence. He had no idea that he had chosen such a similar combination to an adoptive cousin he had never met.

Unlike Emi in the other world, Nik had no mother telling him not to fight monsters. On the contrary, an introduction from Danielle Geller had seen his entry to the Geller family's most elite training program, in Greenstone. Nik was developing a support power set that involved being the central hub of a team, coordinating each member and helping them form powerful synergies.

Now that he was bronze-rank, it was time for Nik to leave Greenstone behind. His problem was that he had no idea what was next. He'd been working with a lot of different teams training with the Gellers, and even a few local ones that weren't. The Geller instructors had told him that learning to work with different people would make him stronger and, as usual, they had been proven right.

With his training over and no permanent team to be a part of, Nik had no clear path forward. He was hoping that the soon-to-be-reunited Team Biscuit would have some advice. For the moment he had Neil, who was not always focused.

"How many sandwiches do you need?" Nik asked.

The Island was a very nice haven for the wealthy and powerful of Greenstone. Nik and Neil had been having regular picnics in the park district since Neil's arrival in the city. They were currently sitting on a huge blanket with a dazzling array of sandwiches set out in front of them.

"You're going to be eating some as well," Neil pointed out.

"I have a decent sense of how many sandwiches I want, and it is significantly fewer than this."

"It's not that many sandwiches."

"The bakery made and packed the whole picnic basket, right?"

"Yeah."

"What did they call this particular bundle?"

"I have no idea."

"I think you do."

"I don't remember."

"I really think you do."

"Fine," Neil grumbled. "It was their picnic for six bundle."

"There aren't six of us."

"I can count, Nik."

"Then why didn't you count in the bakery?"

“It was an elven bakery. They always make small portion sizes.”

“Well I’m smaller than an elf, so I’m one portion size at most. Are you five times larger than an elf, Neil?”

“I am an elf!”

“Then you are eating five portions.”

“Just shut up and eat your sandwiches. You’ll miss them when you’re adventuring on the road. Are you still figuring out how that’s going to work?”

“Yeah. It feels daunting, you know? I’m very young, and there’s always been a path laid out for me. I made decisions for myself, but there was always someone giving me a manageable number of options. Now I have the whole world opened up to me and it’s overwhelming. Too many options feels oddly like no options at all. Maybe just some guidance, you know? Point a guy in a direction.”

“Are you actually asking for advice or just venting.”

“I’m asking, if you have any advice to give.”

“I don’t have any great insight, but I can tell you the approach a lot of adventurers take when leaving Greenstone. If you don’t have a permanent team, you want to avoid the famous adventuring cities. Places like Vitesse and Cyrion are for the adventurers who already know what they’re about. People who have teams or are in with a guild.”

“You’re in a guild, right?”

“I am. The Burning Violet Guild, operating out of Vitesse. All of our team are members except for Jason and Taika. If that’s the way you want to go, graduating from the Geller training grounds will put you in good stead. Especially with the new Remore Academy training annex. You could do well in Vitesse, although I don’t know I’d advise that. You’d have a lot of eyes on you, and you’d be caught up in guild politics. There’s some tension in the guild right now, and you’d inherit that.”

“What kind of tension?”

“A lot of people in the guild think the Remore Academy has too much influence over guild affairs.”

“Do they?”

“Probably. Not a lot of Greenstone adventurers can jump right into the deep water like that, and I’d advise following their example and steering clear of that mess. What they tend to do instead is look for a big city in one of the moderate-strength magic zones. It’s a natural step up from Greenstone. The monsters aren’t so dangerous that you need a high-rank escort, just in case. You get more adventurers assembling teams for individual jobs,

the way they do here. You can get a lot of group contracts without the need for a permanent teams. Did you get any team offers from the Gellers?”

“I did. Nothing felt quite like the right fit, though.”

“Yeah. It feels off, not having the right team. Especially for support roles like ours who need a team around us. But that’s not such a bad place to be when you’re starting out. I know it can feel directionless, but sometimes it’s good to see what the world has for you. Finding out what doesn’t fit is a step towards finding what does.”

“It would be nice to have at least some direction. A goal to strive for.”

“Goals are all well and good, but getting everything you ever wanted might not work out the way you thought. By the time you do, you might find you’re a different person to the one who wanted those things in the first place.”

“Is that why Cassie isn’t here with us?” Nik asked. “Was she meant to eat some of these sandwiches?”

“Stop talking about sandwiches.”

“Stop dodging the question. Is something going on with Cassandra?”

Neil let out a frustrated sigh.

“Back when I was training to be an adventurer,” he said, “I had dreams of travelling the world. Of being on a team with incredible companions and doing things that really mattered. Helping people, you know? I didn’t join the Healer’s church by accident. But I was stuck on a team built around a self-serving coward while nursing a crush on his sister.”

“And now you’re on a famous team with good people. And you and the sister are—”

“Yeah.”

“So, you got everything you ever wanted, but you don’t look or sound ecstatically happy. What’s the issue?”

“Well,” Neil said, “it isn’t the team. Everything is great, there. Rufus, Taika and Jason left a hole, but they also left a proclivity for getting involved in mad cosmic events. It’s been nice, just being adventurers for a while.”

“Yeah, you’re giving off a real ‘lady trouble’ energy.”

“Should I even be talking to you about this? Aren’t you less than three years old?”

“Neil, I was born with the memory of *Wild Orchid II: Two Shades of Blue*. I can handle you and your girlfriend and your feelings. But yes, keep any bedroom stuff to yourself, please and thank you.”

“Gods, you really are his kid, aren’t you?”

An adorably happy smile lit up Nik’s leporine face.

“Really?”

“Yes. You’re happy about that?”

“No,” Nik said, forcing a scowl onto his face. “What’s going on with you and Cassandra? Is it that you’re eating too many sandwiches?”

“I am not eating too many sandwiches!”

“You have to tell her that a lot, don’t you?”

“I don’t... look, Nik, you want to talk about hearing something a lot? What does she ask you about every time you see her? *Who* does she ask you about?”

“Ah,” Nike said with a sympathetic wince. “That. It’s not hard to see where she’s coming from, though. You have to expect it to play on her mind, Neil. Put yourself in her place. Your ex-boyfriend dies. Okay, sad, but not a huge deal. Then you hear he’s come back to life, and the stories just keep rolling in. He had a secret affair with a princess. He’s spending time with diamond-rankers. Including a literally scorching hot redhead who blows up cities and is, as it turns out, also a space princess. Gods are paying him a lot of attention. He tells the great astral being who is invading the planet to leave and he actually does.”

“What’s a space princess?”

“It’s like a regular princess. But in space.”

“I didn’t know that, so I’m fairly certain Cassie doesn’t know that.”

“Not the thing to focus on, Neil. The point is, Cassandra dumped a guy, not because she wanted to, but because her family decided he wasn’t going to amount to anything. Now he’s a living myth and she’s quite naturally wondering what could have been. That’s something that’s going to play on her mind until she meets Jason again and gets some closure. Hopefully.”

Neil groaned and sullenly bit into a sandwich. Nik shrugged and grabbed one for himself. They ate in thoughtful silence.

“I see what you’re saying,” Neil said when he was done. “It makes sense. It’s understandable that Jason would be on her thoughts like that. But it doesn’t make it any easier to hear her talk about him every day. Ask about him every day. I could tell her to stop, but that just means she’s not doing it out loud.”

“Yeah,” Nik said. “Like I said, she needs closure. Maybe suggest she sees a mind healer like Arabelle. That’s just a good idea for any adventurer. But your best shot at her letting it go is having her meet with Jason and get it all out of her system. I’m not saying that it’ll solve all your problems. There’s no guarantees when it comes to what’s going on

in someone's mind. But if she's fixated on the image of him that's stuck in her head, she probably needs to see the reality to at least start moving past it."

Neil picked up another sandwich, looking at it forlornly.

"How bad is it?" Nik asked.

"It's become clear that Cassandra and I won't work until she gets past this."

"Are you sure?" Nik asked. "Because Jason's not coming back any time soon."

Neil let out a resigned sigh.

"Yeah," Neil said and picked up another sandwich. "Thanks, Nik. I think I already knew what I have to do. I was just, I don't know. Scared, I guess. It was all just mixed up enough that I've been talking myself out of doing what I have to."

"Why?" Cassandra asked.

She was watching Neil pack his clothes into a dimensional duffel bag resting on his childhood bed.

"Because you're not with me," Neil told her. "You're with the closest person you can find to a man you dumped eight years ago."

"This is about Jason?"

"Yes, it's about Jason. Do you even realise that's the third question about him you've asked me today?"

"I haven't seen him in years."

"Which is probably the issue. He's on your mind and that makes sense. If I didn't know him, it wouldn't be a problem. But I do, and that makes me a source to assuage your curiosity. It's planted between us like a thorny hedge. If we try to force our way through it we'll just get torn up. Until you see him and get some closure, it's always going to be there. The timing's just wrong for you and me right now."

"What's closure?"

Neil flashed a sad smile.

"I've been seeing a mind healer regularly. I think all adventurers should. It's helped me with how I look at the world."

"What? Why are you talking about mind healers?"

"Closure," he said. "Confronting an aspect of your past and tossing out all of the baggage that comes with it. You need to sit down with Jason and sort through your feelings."

"You think I want him instead of you?"

“No. I know it’s not like that. It’s a complicated bundle of feelings and you need to untangle it before you and I can have anything together.”

“Neil, this is crazy. You’re being jealous and insecure about a man I haven’t seen in years.”

“I’m not jealous, Cass. Well, I am a little, knowing that he’s the one on your mind. It makes sense, though. You weren’t with him for that long, and you’ve known everything about me since we were teenagers. I don’t have any mysteries left for you, and there are always questions about Jason.”

“You think I’m a cat chasing after the most interesting thing that tumbles into view?”

“You don’t have to ask what I think about you, Cass. What I feel. You’ve known since I was a kid smitten with his friend’s big sister. Since a boy’s infatuation became a man’s love. But there are things you need to settle within yourself before you and I can be anything more than a casual fling. And a fling isn’t enough. Not with you. It has to be all or nothing; I won’t accept the middle ground. And since it can’t be ‘all’ until Jason Asano stops living in your head, it has to be ‘nothing.’ At least for now.”

“You’re not worried that if you let me go now, something might happen when I see him again?”

“No. I know Jason, Cassandra. Better than you ever did. He’s a long way from the person you knew, and he’s my friend.”

“He and I were a lot more than friends, Neil.”

“Who says a lover is more than a friend, Cassandra? There are things more intimate than sharing a bed.”

He went back to shoving his clothes into a dimensional bag.

“So, that’s it?” Cassandra asked. “You’re accusing me of being hung up on Jason and leaving?”

He paused packing his clothes and took a slow, calming breath. Without taking his eyes from the bag, he spoke with the careful enunciation of someone straining to hold in an outburst.

“Do you remember what you asked when I got back from having lunch with Nik? About Jason making a person, and what Jason’s fight with the astral beings was like. It’s like this every day, Cass. I’m not going to be your consolation prize.”

“You’re not a second choice, Neil.”

He turned on her with wild eyes.

“Then don’t treat me like I am! Cassandra, it was always you, for me. Long before Jason came along. Why do you think I was so pissy when the two of you were together? It wasn’t on Thadwick’s behalf, I can tell you that much.”

“Maybe instead of walking out the door with no warning, you can sit down with me and talk about this?”

“What’s there to talk about, Cass? Having you stop asking about him every single day? Even if he’s not on your lips, he’ll be in your head. Nothing I can do can fix this. All I can do is make it worse, and that’s why you and I aren’t going to work right now.”

“Is that what you think of me? That I’m just using you as a surrogate for him?”

“No. I don’t think you’re faking the good times we have together. I don’t think you want to trade me out for him. But I’m here for this relationship, Cassandra, and that’s all I’m here for. It feels like you’re here for something else as well, and this is only going to work if it’s you and me, not you, me and him.”

“I’m not looking to resume my relationship with Jason Asano.”

“I know. But it doesn’t have to be romantic for him to be a palpable presence between us. The man in your head and the one in the stories are so different that you can’t let it go, and I understand that. I can tell you all day that the man you remember hasn’t existed for years, but you need to see it for yourself. And that isn’t possible right now.”

“So we wait. That doesn’t mean you have to leave. You don’t have to punish me for it!”

Neil’s eyes went wide and he dashed forward, wrapping her in a comforting hug.

“I’m not trying to punish you,” he said. “None of this is your fault. Or my fault. It’s just timing and circumstance. Your feelings aren’t wrong. Not the ones about him, or the ones you have for me. If I didn’t know Jason, I wouldn’t be this constant reminder in your life. But I am. The way things stand, my presence is only making things worse for you. I hate doing this. I’m so scared of destroying everything.”

Tears streamed down both of their faces as they continued to hold each other.

“If you hate doing this,” she said, “then don’t.”

“I have to, Cass. Some things don’t work out, no matter how much you want them to. And right now, we don’t.”