

Chapter 665

An Egg Starting to Hatch

Standing in the town filled with fallen elves and annihilated parasite worms, Jason looked off to the distance. Something had pinged his aura senses, somewhere out in the rainforest, and he withdrew his magical perception. It was a gold rank adventurer, leaving Jason unsure if he had been noticed in turn, but the person was making a beeline for the town.

“Time to make myself scarce,” he said.

Downstairs, meanwhile, Jason’s team were having a discussion.

“Is he even going to keep up the hidden identity?” Clive asked. “They don’t care here about what happened in Rimaros.”

“He kicked the Builder off the planet,” Sophie said. “I think they might care that the guy who did that is running around.”

“Even so,” Clive said, “the locals have much more immediate concerns. The messengers and these worms are problems now, while the Builder invasion is history.”

“Extremely recent history,” Rufus said. “There are still pockets of Builder cultists scattered around the world. Even here, you know that.”

“We need to finish briefing Korinne’s team,” Humphrey said. “They need to know the complexity of the situation when we go after the messengers.”

“We don’t even know if we’ll still be sent after them,” Clive pointed out. “These worms are going to shake up whatever plans the Adventure Society had. I don’t think Jason will have the luxury of hugging the shadows for much longer. And it’s not like he’s doing a great job at playing nondescript cook. He’s terrible at playing any roles other than lunatic or monster.”

The others nodded their agreement.

“Lindy always complained about me when I was on the job,” Sophie said. “I used to play socialite a lot when we were preparing to rob a place, and she always said I wasn’t embodying the role enough. But at least I wasn’t joining cage fight tournaments.”

“You weren’t?” Humphrey asked.

“Well, once, and she didn’t let me hear the end of it. The job did not go well.”

“Jason isn’t on some infiltration mission,” Rufus said. “It’s not about him maintaining some rigid identity. Most adventurers have secrets; Jason himself is ours. When people see a cook who is obviously more than he appears, it’s not anything to worry about. They’ll assume he’s someone like the princess hiding out in Korinne’s team; some spoiled

aristocrat looking to avoid the trouble that comes with their name. Jason just needs to avoid inspiring too many powerful people into looking closer. If adventurers went looking into every person with obvious secrets, they'd never have time to do any actual adventuring."

"Exactly," Jason said, coming down the stairs. "It's okay to be shady, so long as we don't step on the toes of anyone who can make trouble for us. Where I come from, we call it plausible deniability."

"And when the people we rescued are debriefed?" Clive asked. "What happens when they mention the guy with the starlight cloak that doesn't match any member of our team? It's not a huge leap to someone looking up our team members, present and former."

"Clive," Rufus said. "You were the one who pointed out how busy things will be for the locals. I doubt they will have the time to go looking into Jason with everything going on. Even if they do, Jason's record has been sealed. The whole thing now, not just sections, the way it was in the past. And the classification of those restrictions is high enough that someone has to really want it before the Adventure Society will give them anything."

"Plus, the locals don't know us," Humphrey said. "Any power the prisoners describe will be passed off as belonging to one of us."

"Why are you so keen on me giving up the identity anyway?" Jason asked Clive.

"I just think it would be better if you were back with the team properly."

"I can't argue with that," Jason agreed.

"Also," Clive said, "Colin might be useful to clean up worms in other places. I'm guessing that worm eradication will be a big priority. If you weren't hiding, you could use him more."

"Colin can't replicate enough to be effective on that scale," Jason said. "At best, he can double his standard mass, which he can only maintain while actively feeding anyway. Besides, he's sleeping off Christmas dinner."

"What does that mean?" Sophie asked.

"You never been in a turkey coma?" Jason asked.

"What's turkey?" Clive asked.

Jason looked back up the stairs.

"We can talk about this later," he said. "You're about to get visitors, so it's time for my portal and I to scarper."

Jason and Clive still had active portals that they had funnelled the prisoners through, along with Belinda and Neil. Jason went through his portal and it vanished behind him.

Jason had returned to Yaresh previously, just long enough to reconfigure his cloud construct from land-yacht to palace. He had greater control over the specifics of the design than when he first obtained the cloud flask, and was able to lay it out like a hospital. The palace took the appearance of a hospital as well, with a white, square exterior arranged into three connected wings. The interiors were likewise white, with square tile patterns.

The design was to best facilitate the needs of the camp, being set up to screen, treat and manage the evacuees from worm-infested towns and villages. The ability of the cloud palace to utilise different amenities, as well as clean anything inside it, would be a boon for medical work.

The palace was situated at one end of the space being cleared for the camp, with the other end being near Emir's cloud palace by the wall. Two front-facing wings marked the border of what would become the camp, with one rear wing away from the camp. The rear and one of the front wings each had three storeys, with the remaining front wing having a fourth.

The rear wing contained living space for Jason and his companions. This included Melody, who had remained under Jason's watchful eye while her new secure room was formed. The private wing for Jason and his friends was the only part of the palace that continued to serve as Jason's spirit domain, where his influence was sufficient to impinge upon the natural laws within it.

The front wings Jason withdrew his full influence from, having it operate more like a normal cloud construct. This was critical for allowing in the priests from the Church of the Healer, as they would be cut off from their god's influence in the spirit domain.

This was something that Arabelle and Neil had gotten used to, but they did not have powers directly bestowed through divine essences or awakening stones. They also knew Jason. Explaining why their god was not welcome to a group of clergy while they were busy setting up an evacuee camp was not an efficient use of time. And if they had divinely-granted powers on top, it would be even worse.

Jason knew that leaving the area of a god's influence did not prevent essence abilities with divine origins from working. He had seen that in astral spaces where the influence of gods did not reach. If anything, it might mean that it was harder for the gods to revoke those powers, although Jason couldn't be sure. Another thing he was uncertain about was the degree to which he could interfere with those powers should they be used in an area over which he had dominion. He suspected he could have an influence, but he also suspected that running tests was a bad idea.

The front wings still retained Jason's aura, but he tamped it down to the minimum. Carlos, Arabelle and Neil, all members of the church of the Healer, were already at work and gave him suggestions for facilities he should include. One wing was designed for intake, with treatment rooms and spaces to organise people that were divided by what looked suspiciously like cattle-yard railings. There were also secure screening rooms for checking people for worms, and cells to hold any that did.

The other front wing was designed around secondary services, such as cafeterias and shower rooms that people in the camp would need to visit once or more per day, for as long as the camp was set up. This was the wing with the extra storey, which contained administrative spaces. This was so the people running the camp had a place to retreat to and organise things out from whatever chaos the camp happened to be in.

The palace had only so much space within, however, especially as Jason's palace was smaller than Emir's. Part of that was the rank difference, with his palace being silver-rank currently, compared to Emir's being gold. He suspected that the unique nature of his palace had an effect as well. Given the additional energies being fed into the cloud flask from Jason's soul realm, he guessed that more of the flask's resources were required to contain it.

Because of the size limitation, Jason had abandoned dormitory space entirely to focus on facilities that would benefit from the amenities his cloud palace could offer. Places for the evacuees to live and sleep were being arranged by the churches, civic authorities and the Adventure Society, all of whom had become involved in organising the camp. The Magic Society was also present, but they were in no danger of being put in charge. No one believed that they were interested in the welfare of the evacuees over studying any worms they brought with them.

Jason had no interest in their jostling over influence and had left them to it, returning to the team. Now that he was back, he went to check the results. He had to admit that whoever had ended up in charge worked fast, as the camp had sprawled out in the short time he was away. The area around the palace had been cleared of other vehicles to make room to set up the expansive evacuee camp. That space was already filled with a mix of tents and prefabricated buildings, conjured by Belinda and others with similar powers. The conjured items mostly had a matte plastic look to them, in various colours, with Jason recognising the dark green that belonged to Belinda.

Activity was hectic both inside the palace and out in the camp. People were rushing around, Jason picking up auras that ranged from normal through to gold. He identified the familiar ones, including Amos Pensinata, and Taika who was meditating in the private

section of the palace. Jason was startled to realise that Taika's aura was so close to breaking through to silver that it was like an egg starting to hatch. Jason quietly withdrew his aura and left him to it.

With people hurrying everywhere, it was easy for Jason to tweak his aura such that others overlooked him as he roamed around. This was especially true within the cloud palace, where he could blend into the surrounding aura. He sent Shade's bodies out as well, taking stock of the camp. If anyone was trying to exploit the chaos to work against the camp, the city or Jason, he wanted as much warning as he could get.

After roaming the camp, Jason made his way up to the administrative area on the fourth storey, to a private office he had set aside for his own use. The room was empty and he moved to the front wall, which was a single giant window, overlooking the camp. Shade emerged and floated next to him.

"How are the organisers making use of the palace amenities?" Jason asked.

"Mrs Remore has been appointed facility liaison, to help make the most of the resources at hand. I have been assisting her, naturally, and she has been making sure the palace is being used well. Some assets are unavailable outside of the spirit domain, of course, such as your avatars."

"I don't think a bunch of cycloptic shadow monsters would help the situation, even if they are practical. I'm pretty sure they would just start a panic."

"I concur, Mr Asano."

"Is there anything that would benefit from my personal intervention? In the kitchens, maybe?"

"The procurement, preparation and distribution of food is being handled by the city authorities. They have the cafeterias well in hand and their own personnel in charge. Attempting to take over management would disrupt more than help."

"I don't have to manage things; I could be an extra pair of hands."

"That would require taking orders, Mr Asano."

"I can take orders."

Instead of responding, Shade turned his head toward Jason.

"Yeah, alright," Jason grudgingly conceded. "Just keep scouting the camp outside the palace and let me know if anything crops up. Actually, position some bodies around the city as well, and maybe a few to patrol outside the city walls."

"You are concerned that the messengers will attack?"

"Rufus doesn't think so, but I can't shake the idea."

"Why not?"

"Because that's what I'd do."

"What would you do about the city defence infrastructure?"

"Not sure. I'm guessing readiness levels would make sabotage unreliable. Maybe set up something inside the city to draw defenders from the walls, then hammer one point hard. I'm no strategic genius, so maybe I'm all wrong. It's not like my suspicions are specific enough that I can check them out."

"Mrs Remore is working with the camp leader to help make the most of the palace's facilities," Shade said. "Shall I mention to her that if something does happen, she should be ready to evacuate the palace so it can be reconfigured?"

"That's a good idea, Shade. It's probably nothing. I hope it's nothing, and not just because I don't want to see the city attacked. I don't want to find out that I think like a messenger."

"I suspect, Mr Asano, that they would be more alarmed to discover they think like you."

"Was that a compliment or an insult?"

"Yes, Mr Asano. It was."