

Chapter 861

Staring Out at the Dark

Rufus and Taika were handed dimensional bags filled with items, including recordings from Jason and Farrah. They each moved to the middle of a ritual platform and were slowly sealed inside egg-shaped conjured dimensional vessels. The brown ovoids spread from the platform up, and Rufus locked eyes with Gary until their line of sight was blocked.

Boris conducted a large-scale ritual, at the culmination of which the messengers and the two vessels all vanished. The onlookers departed, almost everyone having more than enough to do in the wake of the expedition's return. Farrah and Gary didn't rush off, instead taking an aimless stroll through the empty streets.

"Are we heading somewhere in particular?" she asked.

"Anywhere quiet."

"Everywhere is quiet here," she said. "What are..."

She trailed off as a divine aura announced the arrival of a god. Hero looked not unlike Gary's demigod form; a leonid too large for even Gary's hulking species.

"Thank you for waiting," Gary said.

"If not the ancient and immortal," Hero asked, "then from whom can you expect patience? In any case, Asano's invitation to this place was contingent on letting you make your goodbyes first."

"Excuse me, your godness," Farrah said, "but I didn't think deities could enter Jason's spirit domains at all."

"His control over his power grows," the god said, "and will only continue to do so. I had hoped he would use it to vouchsafe your life, Gareth Xandier."

"He gave me a choice," Gary said. "I chose."

Hero nodded.

"I know that you intend to hold my power a little longer. Please continue with my blessing, for as long as you can tolerate it."

"It's your blessing that got us here in the first place," Farrah muttered.

"*Farrah!*" Gary admonished.

Hero held out a restraining hand.

"She is not wrong," the god said, sadness tinging his voice. "I am sorry that this is all I had to offer you."

"Yeah, well, maybe come up with a less lethal miracle," Farrah said.

“Farrah!”

“I would like that,” Hero said. “But change is hard for my kind, and often comes with consequences we neither foresee nor welcome. We only have to look to Purity for that.”

“I am sorry for her disrespect,” Gary said. *“And so is she.”*

“It’s alright,” Hero said. “I would not act this way with every god, Farrah Hurin, but I am the god of heroes. I, of all, understand that actions, not power, are what makes one worthy of respect. And all I do is kill heroes.”

The sadness emanating from the god’s aura was on a divine level and Farrah felt caught up in it, as if struck by a tidal wave. Tears spilled from her eyes. She felt the god’s despair at his role, undeniable and sincere.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

The god placed a large hand on her shoulder as she bent her head. His voice became warm and paternal.

“Feel no shame in standing for a friend, child. Instead take pride in doing so, especially in the face of a god.”

“With respect,” Gary said, “I’m not sure you should be encouraging that behaviour.”

The god let out a laugh, startling the mortal and the demigod.

“You are fine heroes, both of you. And being a hero is more than just weapons and battlefields. I know of your project, Farrah Hurin. Working to connect the world. More good will come from that than any ‘glorious war.’”

Hero said the last two words as if they left a bad taste in his mouth.

“To be honest, I’m mostly doing it for the money,” Farrah said and the god laughed again.

“‘To be honest?’ You should not lie to gods, Farrah Hurin.”

Gary looked up as Gwydion Remore approached them, wandering down an empty street. The priest bowed before his god.

“Lord Hero.”

The god nodded his acknowledgement, then turned back to Gary. When he spoke, his paternal tone had once more become divine and imposing.

“I have permitted you to keep my power for so long as you can hold it, Gareth Xandier, but there is one order of business to be settled now.”

The god stepped back and Gwydion moved to stand before Gary. There was none of Gwydion’s normal amusement in his expression as he bowed before Gary, as deeply as he had for his god.

“Gareth Xandier,” he intoned. “You are a hero, to be sung through the ages. Your battle is done and your well-earned time of rest draws near. I ask that you bestow your relic upon my church, in testament to your deeds.”

Gary looked at Gwydion for a long time, the priest still bent over in mid-bow. Then he held out his hand, into which an enormous hammer appeared with a burst of golden fire. He held it out and Gwydion stood up. Despite his serious expression, Gwydion couldn't keep the mirth from his eyes as he read the words ‘Gary's Medium Hammer,’ etched into the weapon's massive head.

“Thank you, hero. I wish you nothing but joy in the time that is left to you.”

“I didn't do it to be remembered,” Gary said. “But there's not much point holding onto the thing. We both know that when you say my battle is done, I don't have anything useful left to do for anyone.”

“Gary—”

“Don't, Gwydion. I gave you my hammer. At least have the decency to not pay for it with a nice lie. I never wanted to be a hero.”

Gwydion looked at Gary in silence, his expression conflicted. He turned and left, carrying the hammer reverently, if somewhat unsteadily, away. Although the priest's gold-rank strength was enough to lift it, it still weighed many times more than he did. It was also large enough that he looked like a child making off with his father's weapon.

When Gary and Farrah turned to look back at the god, they realised he was gone, only his divine aura lingering.

“That's it, then,” Gary said. “No more obligations. Not until the end.”

Farrah gripped Gary's much larger hand and gave it a squeeze.

The aftermath of the expedition to the underground was a mess. The Adventure Society and the Magic Society both wanted answers. The emergence of a new polity, deep underground, was a complication to their closest neighbour, and Yareh had enough problems already.

The appearance of the transformation zone had led the messengers to realise that the soul forge their astral king had put so much effort into was almost certainly lost to them. The truce with Yareh came to a violent end as fighting resumed for the first time since the messengers invaded.

Yareh itself was not the centre of the fighting, with its magical defences being the one thing left largely intact. Instead, skirmishes took place in the smaller population centres in the region. Not long recovered from the monster surge, the towns and villages

left alone for their lack of strategic importance were suddenly subjected to raids for no better reason than to slake an astral king's anger.

Yaresh and her adventurers struck back hard, repeatedly raiding the remaining messenger strongholds. With so many resources dedicated to rebuilding the city, they could not afford to besiege fortifications reinforced by advanced messenger magic. Even so, they forcefully struck back against the messengers.

Rather than dedicating the forces required to breach the strongholds, Yaresh and the Adventure Society deployed powerful champions to periodically hammer the enemy defences. Attacking with elites only saved on valuable manpower and avoided unaffordable casualties. Rather than successfully penetrate the defences, they bled the messengers of the resources required to repair their defences after each attack.

The messenger strongholds boasted magnificent protective magic, beyond anything found in Pallimustus. Diamond-rankers were the ultimate trump card, however, and while Yaresh had two, the only one on the messenger side had died invading the city. Not only did Charist and Allayeth punish the messenger defences but also pushed them to the limit. The messengers had to fully restore them after each attack if they wanted to withstand the next.

The skirmish was lasted for months, defined by logistical shortcomings. The messengers weren't allowed to withdraw, yet were no longer being reinforced or resupplied. Their astral king drove them to spend their lives on petty, inconsequential revenge.

Yaresh and the Adventure Society wanted to crush their enemy, but were unwilling to divert the requisite people and resources. With messenger attacks in the region ongoing and the city under reconstruction, the decision was made to let attrition end the messengers. If their astral king wanted to sacrifice them in dribs and drabs for nothing, her enemies were happy to let her.

The main casualties on both sides came from the messenger attacks on towns and villages. Despite the increasingly dire situation the messengers were in, they continued their pointless attacks against now mostly evacuated towns and villages. The adventurers became increasingly adept at predicting and countering their unevolving patterns of attack. By the time the transformation zone opened up, it was less a defensive patrol program than an exercise in messenger hunting.

It was clear that the messengers were done in the region. Their numbers fell too far and their resources dwindled too much to effectively defend their last stronghold. They

were beyond the point where they would have needed to spring a trap that revealed their poor tactics to be grand strategy.

In the end, the diamond rankers all but strolled in to eliminate the final defenders. The messengers fought to almost the very last, with only a few notable leaders absent when the fortress finally fell. That was a little more than a month after the transformation zone ended and the expedition finally returned to the surface. What was left of Jason's team even participated in the final raids.

The messenger war had ended for Yaresh, at least until another astral king found some reason to return. The celebration was enthusiastic but modest, as the aftermath was bitter. The astral king's ambitions had been destructive enough, but her spite in failure was worse for the pointlessness of it. She had let her own people die for no more reason than to scorch as much earth as they could. The reconstruction would be more daunting than the wake of any monster surge.

One bright light had been the growth chambers of the underground city. They had the capacity to sustain hundreds of thousands, yet had only ten thousand to feed. The ability to solve the region's food problem instantly was a massive boon for the brighthearts who were now faced with diplomatic relations for the first time in centuries.

Jason's team, like the rest of the expedition, faced weeks of debriefing meetings with the Adventure Society. Their insistence that they would not answer to any Magic Society representatives caused contention but was ultimately accepted. Danielle Geller did not have the reputation on this side of the world she did in her homeland... at first. That changed in direct proportion to the bureaucratic pressure applied to her son.

Danielle also teleported Farrah's parents in from Rimaros. Despite her desire to return to her personal project, Farrah and her parents joined Gary and his in what remained of Jason's soul realm. While the rest of their friends were dealing with one debrief after another, Farrah quickly fled to the tree city and didn't come back out.

Others had migrated into the tree city as well. Mostly this consisted of Carlos Quilido and a new research team he'd assembled. His previous assistants had returned to Rimaros while Carlos was underground, although many returned. The funding was not a problem due to the father of Gibson Amouz, the young nobleman in the care of Carlos.

Gibson had been trapped in a customised stasis chamber for around a year, rescued halfway through a conversion process meant to turn him into a zealot slave. Undoing the horrors visited upon him was the focus of Carlos' work. The Healer priest was hoping that success would lead to saving others thought lost forever to vampirism and related conditions.

Jason had set up a research centre in the tree city, the hope being that Jason's power to manipulate reality there would help advance the research while keeping the subjects alive. One of those subjects was Sophie's mother, Melody Jain. The zealots of the Order of Redeeming Light she had once led were the rest of the subjects. Some accepted being led into the tree city and some did not. Those who refused were confined in the brightheart city with the permission of Lorenn.

Also staying were former teammates Arabelle Remore and Callum Morse. Arabelle was a part of Carlos' research project, trying to keep the subjects sane while he kept them alive. Those subjects who had entered the soul realm had the influence controlling them turned off by Jason's power, like Sophie's mother. Arabelle's role would be to help them through their trauma.

As for Callum Morse, Arabelle wanted to help him as well. She blamed herself for failing to notice the deteriorating mental health of her friend. He had spent years searching for Melody with what became an unhealthy obsession. With Melody wanting to reconnect with Callum, Arabelle intended to do her best to help both.

Jason's team was down several members following the underground expedition. Jason himself was a critical source of damage, but the absence of Rufus and Taika was also felt. They had been temporary members from the start, but how temporary had always been an open question. With how well they had fit in, bringing welcome power and versatility, their departure left a hole.

After weeks of unceasing questions, the team was extremely ready to move on. Especially when more and more answers began with "I don't know."

"I don't know, it was a weird Jason thing."

"I don't know why it was shaped like his head."

"I don't know. It looked like a bunch of magic carriages all stuck together to make a giant golem."

After a final visit to Farrah, Gary, and Melody in the tree city, the team prepared to leave. The destination was the city of Vitesse, in the nation of Estercost. When they left, it was with another temporary team member, to try and patch over the hole in their ranks.

Team Storm Shredder was over. The surviving members were Rosa, the team scout, Amos Pensinata's nephew Orin, and Zara Nareen. Amos took Orin back to Rimaros and Rosa went with them. The scout had been shaken to the core, and Zara knew that she

would not return to adventuring soon, if ever. The silent Orin was as hard to read as ever and she had no idea how the trauma had affected him.

Despite being a latecomer, Zara had built a strong camaraderie during her brief but exciting time with the team. In the aftermath of its destruction, she was left shaken, alone and fragile. When she had been at her most lost, the team was the place she found. Her intentions had been foolish at first, but as her sense of belonging had grown, that belonging had become her purpose. Now, there was nothing left to belong to.

She had no place left. Her father had sent people to bring her home, and she had followed, but the messes she had left back home had not gone away. The political fiction of being cast out was still a necessity and it was not long before she returned to Yaresh. In the last days of the messenger war, she threw herself into the fight against the messengers. It was good work for good people, but it wasn't a purpose.

When the last messenger stronghold fell, Zara was once more at a loss. On the night of the victory celebration, she stood alone on the city wall, looking out into the dark.

"There's that look again."

Zara turned to find Sophie standing next to her. She hadn't snuck up so much as been moving faster than Zara's aura senses could detect.

"How do you move that fast without kicking up the wind?" Zara asked.

"The wind is kind enough to get out of the way," Sophie told her. "What's in your way, Princess? I saw you out there, fighting the messengers. You went hard. Harder than a lot of people like you I've robbed. But here you are, with the same look that was on your face when we came out of the hole."

Sophie's expression softened. She moved to the stone balustrade next to Zara and stared into the night.

"It's not easy losing people," she said. "I know that, and I've never lost anyone who meant anything to me other than my dad. But I have people that matter, now. Lindy, Humphrey... all of them. I don't know what kind of kick in the teeth that would be. I spent so long keeping people out. Now that I've finally let them in, I think losing them might break me."

"I'm not broken," Zara said, hesitant as she looked for the words. "The team mattered to me, but we weren't so close that..."

She closed her eyes, squeezing out tears.

"It hurts, but I'm not broken. I'm lost. I was starting to belong; to have a purpose. Being part of something; building it together."

“And you threw yourself into tearing up the messengers to push all that aside, if only for a little bit. I get that.”

“It was doing good for good people. But that’s not a purpose.”

“It’s purpose enough for me. But I’m just a thief, not a princess.”

“I’m not a princess anymore. And you’re not a thief.”

“But you can be a princess again. If you want it. Maybe not the Hurricane Princess, but there are worse things to be than ordinary, everyday royalty. I understand there are fewer decapitations if you don’t stand out.”

“You know nothing about how royalty works, do you?”

“No, and I don’t care. And as for thieving, I haven’t entirely left that behind. Adventuring calls for it more often than I expected.”

“Do you think I’m playing at adventurer? Waiting to go back to my palace?”

“Nope. I’ve seen you bleed, Princess. Seen your team members drag you out of the fight for refusing to leave people behind. Even if you had to prove anything to me, which you don’t, you’d have proven yourself just fine.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I don’t know. I’m just talking. It’s not for me to tell you how to live your life. I guess, if I’m saying anything, it’s that good work for good people isn’t so bad. While you’re waiting for purpose to come along, you can spend your life staring out at the dark, or you can spend it doing some good.”

“The messengers are all dead.”

Sophie let out a chuckle.

“There’s plenty more where they came from. And if you’re tired of dealing with messengers, there’s always good work to be done somewhere. I even know some good people, if you’re looking.”