

Chapter 463

What a Monster Surge Feels Like

Gary and Jory and Jason's team were on the open deck of a skyship, heading into the range where they could portal to Vitesse.

"Is everyone feeling that?" Humphrey asked.

"I am," Neil said, the rest of the group agreeing. A tremulation in the ambient magic started small but grew rapidly in strength and was shortly creating turbulence for the skyship.

"What is this?" Sophie asked. "Is this what a monster surge feels like?"

"No," Clive said. "No, it isn't."

The rainbow light over Jason's spirit realm slowly faded out to be replaced with a blank grey. Even as it did, increasing amounts of foliage, branches and even whole trees were blasting past, their number increasing as the light faded. By the time the light was entirely gone, there was a constant stream of debris passing overhead, ripped through the air by devastating winds.

"What's going on?" Farrah asked.

"We've arrived," Jason said. "In the middle of a storm. A cyclone, from the looks of it. There goes my plan to step out and take in a lungful of clean, fresh air."

"We don't breathe."

"Oh, yeah."

Belinda and Clive had already rushed below decks to see if they could help the engineers right the skyship as it moved from poorly controlled flight towards poorly controlled fall. Neil and Gary were ushering other passengers below decks while Sophie and Humphrey had jumped overboard, using flight, teleport and other movement powers to retrieve the few already bucked off by violent turbulence.

There were other adventurers amongst the passengers who likewise stepped in to stem the chaos. Eventually, the ship righted itself and Clive and Belinda came back up, accompanied by the chief engineer.

"...I didn't even know you could do that with resonating cascade rods," the frazzled engineer praised Belinda.

“Improvisation is a specialty of hers,” Clive said. “If you ever need to take her prisoner, I’d just have a guard hit her on the head every time she regains consciousness. And sometimes when she hasn’t to make sure.”

“Hey...” Belinda complained.

“I once saw her take down a trap barrier from the inside with a broken wand and a device for checking the freshness of fish,” Clive continued.

The team regrouped on the top deck, along with key members of the crew and some other adventurers who had likewise helped out.

“Any idea what’s happening?” the captain asked the chief engineer.

“It’s not a problem with the ship,” the chief engineer said. “Ship sensors are reading massive disruptions in the ambient magic as far as they’ll reach. We’ve managed to cobble together an adaptation to compensate but it won’t hold. We need to get on the ground slow before we hit it fast.”

“It’s the monster surge,” Clive said. “It’s starting.”

“I’ve lived through three monster surges,” the captain said. “Monster surges don’t do this.”

“This one does,” Clive said.

“We picked something up on the ship’s sensors,” the chief engineer said. “Something big and strange, somewhere off to starboard.”

They all looked but no one saw anything but clear skies.

“I think your sensors are wrong,” one of the adventurers said.

“No,” Clive said. “You don’t see it because it doesn’t exist yet.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” the adventurer asked. “You’re talking out of your...”

He trailed off as a rainbow light erupted in the sky, above and starboard of the ship. It was the rainbow light of a magic manifestation, but the size was almost incomprehensibly vast.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance that’s a really, really big awakening stone,” Neil said.

“It has to be a diamond-rank monster, right?” one of the adventurers said. “That’s too big even for gold rank.”

“I saw a diamond-rank manifestation, two monster surges back,” the captain said. “Even that wasn’t this big.”

“Captain,” the chief engineer said. “I take back what I said about getting onto the ground. Let’s get out of here as fast as we can.”

The captain and engineer ran off toward their stations.

“This is what Dawn warned us about, isn’t it?” Belinda asked.

“I think so,” Clive said. “I don’t think being nearby is a good idea. We should go help the engineer keep this thing afloat while we get out of here.”

“Normal manifestations take a while, right?” Jory asked. “Especially the big ones?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “Hopefully we’re well away before something comes out of that light.”

Jason opened a portal from his spirit realm and he and Farrah finally set foot back onto Farrah’s homeworld. It was not a friendly welcome as they were immediately blasted with horizontal rain and the powerful wind that was tearing up the plants and trees of the tropical jungle in which they found themselves. Even as silver-rankers, they could barely stay on their feet because they didn’t weigh enough. Farrah had to conjure her heavy stone armour while shadow arms reached out to anchor Jason to nearby trees and rocks.

Farrah pointed to a rocky rise and they moved downwind of it, hunkering down as the storm raged past them. Their clothes were already drenched, clinging to their bodies as they crouched down, out of the worst of the wind.

“I wish I still had my magic umbrella,” Jason said through voice chat. Trying to speak over the howling wind would be pointless. “I left it with Emi.”

“It was iron-rank anyway,” Farrah said. “It would have a hard time with a storm this strong. We’re in a high magic zone and this storm has soaked up some of the ambient magic.”

Jason pulled up his map power and zoomed out to a global scale. Their location was marked as somewhere in the Caribbean Sea. As he had never been to this world’s equivalent, he saw no details, only the outlines of landmasses. There seemed to be three additional major islands compared to Jason’s world, south of the local equivalents to Cuba and Haiti. Jason and Farrah were on an island sufficiently minor that at the current scale it didn’t even appear on the map. Jason shared the ability to see the map with Farrah.

“The Sea of Storms,” she said. “Makes sense. We’re in the Storm Kingdom, which rules the islands of the Sea of Storms, along with many of the surrounding coastal regions.”

“Your world doesn’t have Christopher Columbus or cruise lines, so it’s probably nicer here than in mine,” Jason said.

“Don’t be so sure. We have magic and it’s called the Sea of Storms for a reason. There are major storms every month or so during storm season, which is two-thirds of the

year. And during that time, there's always at least one powerful, localised storm happening somewhere in the Storm Sea."

"But it's nice otherwise?"

"So I've heard," Farrah said. "I've never been. Emir has, but he's not allowed back. He stole something from the royal family a few years back."

"That rings a bell," Jason said. "I think he told me about that once. Speaking of Emir, how about we find the coast, pull out a cloud ship and change into some dry clothes?"

"I like this plan."

"Shade, what do you have for us?" Jason shouted into the wind. Darkness spilled out of Jason's shadow, taking the form of a beetle the size of a short passenger bus. On the beetle's back was a dome of translucent chitin, the inside of which was hollow. The beetle had a pair of large, multi-jointed arms that were longer than its other legs.

The translucent chitin opened a gap as the hard substance turned to liquid and flowed to make a round hole. The long arms picked up Jason and Farrah and deposited them inside as climbing or jumping in the blasting wind would be a difficult proposition. The gap closed behind them, shutting out the wind and rain and noise. Chairs made of soft, comfortable shadow-stuff rose from the dark chitin under their feet.

"Nice one, Shade," Jason said.

"It seemed appropriate for the terrain," Shade said.

"This is a treasure beetle, right?" Farrah asked as she started stripping off her wet clothes and pulling dry ones from her dimensional bag. "I've heard of them but never seen one because they get hunted down as soon as they're found."

"I'm assuming that's something to do with why they're called treasure beetles," Jason said, turning to look away despite Farrah's unconcern. He changed his clothes using his inventory system, dark mist emerging and swapping his outfits before dispersing again.

"They're very sensitive to materials with large amounts of magic," Farrah explained as she changed. "Ores, magic herbs, items left behind when some adventurer died alone. They can burrow very well and harvest herbs without damaging them using those big arms. They store them in the domes on their backs, which preserves the magic."

"They're a walking treasure trove. Not a fantastic survival trait."

The skyship was shuddering as it pushed its speed while also running on jury-rigged modifications to handle the disrupted ambient magic conditions. Anyone not an adventurer or crew member had been banished below decks, although there had been few complaints.

Belinda and Clive were working with the engineer in the bowels of the ship while the rest of their group was watching the manifestation they were hoping to escape before whatever was coming out of the rainbow light appeared. They realised that they had underestimated the size of it as they moved away rapidly yet it continued to loom large in the sky above them.

“On the bright side,” Gary said, “this means Jason and Farrah are either here or will be soon, right?”

“That’s what Clive said,” Jory confirmed. “Then it’s just a matter of finding them.”

“It’s going to be a mess getting information with a monster surge going on,” Humphrey said. “Especially this one. The Adventure Society is going to be tying up all the public water-link chambers, making long-range communication tricky. My family always has a private link chamber in our family compounds, although they will no doubt be busy as well.”

“Church of Knowledge?” Neil suggested.

“Jason had a way to come back before he left,” Sophie said. “If she didn’t tell us that after he died, why would she help us now?”

“It’s worth trying anyway,” Humphrey said. “Our best bet is the Adventure Society, though. If Jason checks in with any branch, his status will be updated across every branch. Then we’ll know where to go.”

"Look," Neil said, pointing. "I think it's happening."

The rainbow light started to fade and something was appearing in its place, shimmering into being like a ghost.

“Dawn was telling the truth,” Sophie said weakly. “It really is a city.”

As she said, an entire city was coming into being in the air, floating high above the ground. The underside was all rock as if the city had been ripped from the ground, while the rest was a stone city surrounded by high walls, with towers jutting out over the top.

“Well, damn,” Neil said.

The island Jason and Farrah were on proved to be both small and uninhabited. Shade’s treasure beetle form navigated the jungle terrain handily and they soon reached the coast where Jason opened up his cloud flask. The clouds streaming out were teased by the wind but no more, the cyclonic power of the storm insufficient to disrupt the cloud flask’s magic.

Soon, a very large pleasure yacht was resting calmly on a sea that was anything but. It wasn’t in the Earth style but more like the ones Jason had seen at the Greenstone

marina. He had spent a pleasant day with Cassandra Mercer on a smaller version of such a boat, not that long before she dumped him. Jason and Farrah went aboard and Shade took position as pilot.

“My map is a blank other than raw geography,” he said. “Should we just steer towards a big island and see what we get?”

Jason brought up a map of the Sea of Storms on the wall. Because the cloud flask was soul-bonded, it was able to replicate his map ability, at least to display a map. The more tactical functions, like enemy tracking, were still restricted to Jason himself.

“These islands here,” Farrah said, pointing off the coast of what on Earth was Venezuela.

“I think one of those is Aruba,” Jason said. “Works for me. I’m pretty sure the boat can handle the weather, so you can set out, Shade. What is this place we’re going to?”

“The capital of the Storm Kingdom, Rimaros,” Farrah said.

“Rimaros?” Jason said. “I met a woman named Rimaros. I heard she was the princess of something, which I guess is here. Hey, I know a local.”

“You might not want to lean on that connection,” Farrah said. “We should keep our heads down and not make trouble. Which, I’ll remind you, is kind of not your thing.”

“Oh, I learned that lesson,” Jason said. “I got to be a famous superhero and it turned out to suck. I say we find the nearest Adventure Society branch, quietly do our part with the monster surge, find our teams and finish up this magic bridge without making any waves.”

“You know it’s never going to be that simple,” Farrah told him. “You don’t seriously think you can avoid being caught up in the Builder invasion, right?”

“A bloke can dream, can’t he?”

“What’s that?” Humphrey asked. “Are those airships coming out of the city?”

One of the adventurers around them cast a spell and the air in front of them shimmered. When it settled, everything seen through it looked much closer and they could clearly make out the skyships. They rose over the walls of the city and even emerged from tunnels in the rock underneath.

“Am I mistaken in thinking that it looks like two of those things are coming right for us?” Neil said.

“No, you’re not,” Humphrey said. “Sophie, go get Lindy and Clive.”