

## Chapter 549

### Hope

Liara sensed Cassin Amouz leave the Adventure Society administration building, her face filled with anger not at him but at herself.

“Dammit.”

Her hand came down forcefully on her desk and it broke in half, scattering books and papers onto the floor.

“Damn it.”

“Lady Liara,” Shade said, emerging from her shadow.

Liara grimaced.

“I’m sorry you had to witness that. The man’s son and heir is missing; of course he’s angry and willing to do everything in his power to get him back. He didn’t need or deserve the way I came down on him and I’ve probably made things a lot worse.”

“That sounds extremely familiar,” Shade said. “If you do not find it presumptuous, Lady Liara, might I perhaps offer some advice? I will take no offence if you decline. I understand that unsolicited advice is often less than welcome in trying times.”

Liara slumped wearily in her chair, looking at the shadow entity.

“You probably have a lot of life experience, don’t you?” she said. “How old are you?”

“I don’t know. Until civilisations started measuring time, it never occurred to me to keep track.”

Liara blinked, mildly startled at the implications of Shade’s response.

“I’d be open to benefiting from your experience,” she said.

“I appreciate that, Lady Liara, but I believe it is not my experience you will most benefit from. I recommend you take a trip to Mr Asano’s cloud house and take the time to speak with him.”

“Why?”

“Mr Asano has experience fighting with organisations that hide like hydras in the dark, growing new heads for each one you cut off.”

“No offence, Shade, but I’m not sure that a gold-ranker turning to a silver as the voice of experience is the approach for me.”

“Are you so sure, milady? Mr Asano has been in a knife fight with the Builder. He has sacrificed his life to save cities on two worlds and fought whole organisations while his allies acted more like enemies. He’s travelled between dimensions and saved his own world more than once. He’s channelled forces that would annihilate diamond-rankers and

remade sections of reality in his own image. He has encroached on the domain of gods. You have spent more time fighting monsters than him, yes, but he has fought them by the tens of thousands. Whole cities overrun as he desperately scrambled to save their inhabitants, knowing that he would fail countless people who would die drenched in fear and pain.”

“Are you sure he wants you telling me all of this?”

“He knows what it is to face the enemies in front of you and to carry the burden of lives he failed to save, in spite of his determination. He knows the helplessness of a nebulous enemy that acts with seeming impunity. He understands the price that taking those fights levies on the soul. He will help you, Lady Liara, and be glad to do so.”

Liara stared at Shade in silence for a long time while Shade waited with the patience of eons. It had allowed him to endure centuries of waiting for the Reaper trials to start and the first thirty-seven minutes of *Zardoz*. Sometimes life was too short, even for an immortal entity.

“He’s faced a lot for his rank, hasn’t he?” Liara asked finally.

“He has faced a lot for any rank, Lady Liara. When he was in a position like yours, facing hidden enemies with no clear path forward, he also turned to threats and anger when compassion would have been the more useful path. He has many regrets. I believe you can benefit from his experience and he can benefit from someone who can empathise, even a little. I would also recommend to you Arabelle Remore. She is helping him come to terms with what he’s done and has left to do. I believe they can offer you some clarity that I think you realise you need.”

Liara rubbed her hands over her weary face as Shade retreated to her shadow.

“Rodney!” she called out and the Adventure Society functionary assigned as her temporary assistant came in through the door.

“Ah,” Rodney said, looking at the disaster of the room scattered with papers and the broken desk. He held out his hands and the books and papers flew up into the air as if caught up in a wind that didn’t exist. The broken halves of the table came back together, splinters moving back as the table returned to its pre-broken state, with no signs of having been damaged. The books and papers descended to stack onto the table in random piles.

“I’m afraid you’ll need to reorganise them yourself, Lady Liara.”

“That was quite impressive, Rodney.”

“Most of the administrative assistant pool has wood and paper essences, milady. This happens quite a lot.”

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After her breakneck speed over the water between Rimaros and the mainland, and the excitement it brought down on her, Sophie took a more sedate pace. The road network cutting through the jungle was made up of the typical, well-maintained thoroughfares that linked the Storm Kingdom's population centres. She chose her moderated pace based on advice from her companion, to whom she chatted as she sat atop a hill looking out over the water.

"I'm a little surprised you didn't tell on me when that tentacle monster was trying to snatch me," Sophie said.

She was resting in the long grass beside the road at a point where it crested a hill with excellent ocean views. She could see out over the water, spotting a magical storm far off toward the horizon. She had stopped to eat the packed lunch Jason had made her.

"Mr Asano's views on privacy are quite clear," Shade said from Sophie's shadow. "I am only to relay information without your permission when you are either incapacitated or confronted with a threat that assistance could potentially help combat. As only Mr Asano could reach you by shadow-jumping directly to me, there was no point. He would not have been able to defeat the creature or even escape, as you did. He would have been leaping to his death."

"But you didn't even tell him."

"You have not spent as much time with Mr Asano as I, Miss Wexler, so let me assure you that leaping to his death is very much kind of his thing."

"Yeah," she laughed. "That was fairly clear from the outset."

Sophie's feelings on Jason were still something of a mess. He had pulled her out of a life that had been careening from bad to worse where the solution to each disaster had been to plant the seed of the next which would only worsen. With every desperate choice, she and Belinda had been digging a hole that would only ever go deeper without offering a path of escape.

Jason had no reason to help them beyond Jory and his affection for Belinda. On the contrary, there had been every incentive to hand Sophie over to the Adventure Society and reap the rewards from the long-standing contract to capture her. Instead, in a move that baffled her at the time but would prove to be iconically typical, he initiated a wild plan to simultaneously challenge the directors of the Adventure and Magic Societies. Also typical was that against all odds, it worked, garnering him new and dangerous enemies in the process.

When she asked him why, he gave her a different answer every time. She later realised that he was telling her who he was over and over in different ways, knowing she

wouldn't believe any of what he said. In the end, it came down to the fact that he would rather have died fighting to save a stranger than live with condemning one. That Jason had been a hero. A naïve, idiotic, one, doomed to have one of his many attempts at self-sacrifice succeed, which it ultimately did.

In his absence, Jason became a strange figure in Sophie's head and one that even he could never live up to. It took a long time before he stopped occupying that dominant space in her thoughts and she had been able to start moving on.

Then, he came back.

He was different, which was inevitable. He was the same, at a glance, but it was only skin deep. Something grim had stained the light-hearted hero she knew, somewhere so deep it wasn't ever coming out. She knew it had started when he was taken in Greenstone; the price he paid for helping two thieves who didn't deserve it. But Sophie had seen him getting better. His time away from them had made him much worse.

She had already chosen Humphrey by the time he came back. It wasn't an empty decision, made only once she knew he was returning, and it proved to be the right one. What she'd been attracted to in Jason was a goodness that she hadn't experienced in her life, up to that point. It was something she had come to admire. To aspire to. She eventually realised that Humphrey had those traits as well; he just lacked Jason's way of looking at a wall and seeing a potential door, if only he had the determination.

Humphrey had also changed in the wake of Jason's death. He stopped accepting things as they were and started looking deeper. He began to challenge not just what he felt was wrong but the platforms on which they stood. He wanted to be more like what he'd admired in Jason and, in the process, became what Sophie had been looking for in Jason. Both of them were shocked by what they saw in Jason on his return. The man they had known was a mask this new one wore, and it didn't fit all that well.

Humphrey and Sophie had discussed the changes in Jason more than once. There was a coldness to him now. A willingness to be cruel. What worries Sophie the most was that the strange, wild compassion that has transformed her life seemed to be absent. Its loss had hurt the sense of hope that Jason himself had instilled in her.

Sophie had not treated Jason well after they met. She hadn't trusted him or even the simple concept that anyone would do a good thing for no more reason than it was kind. She lashed out and he had taken it. From what Farrah told her, he had done the same thing again, but for a whole world. And like her, the world had lashed out.

Unlike Sophie, Jason's world didn't attack him with the defensive fearfulness of a wounded animal, the way she had. They had done so out of ambition, greed and the

desire to keep the power they had, seize more, or both. The years he had spent there had taken their toll and left the man who came back to them irrevocably changed.

Jason's friends had quickly realised that he was, in many ways, broken. They had consulted with Farrah and Arabelle who told them that what Jason needed more than anything was trust. He would never go back to the way he was, but who ever did? What they could do was help him to realise that there was something other than enemies. It was easy to say, but he was in a place where it was not so easy to believe. What Jason needed to regain was hope; a sense that things could actually get better.

Strangely, Sophie had gone from dismay at the changes in Jason to being buoyed by the chance to offer him the kind of help he had once given her. She had been angry and distrustful and he helped her. He had shown her that he could be trusted and there really were such things as kindness, decency, loyalty and hope. Now she had the chance to remind him in turn. She wasn't going to push, any more than he had pushed her. She would take a page from his own book and do nothing more than prove her point by living it.

"He is getting better, right?" she asked. "I'm not just imagining it?"

"It is not just your imagination, Miss Wexler. He's improving more quickly than I had even hoped, but he still has roads left to travel."

"Don't we all?"

She finished her sandwich, returned the wrapping paper it was in to the lunch tin Jason had given her and placed the tin in the dimensional pouch at her waist. She then got up and brushed off her pants.

"Miss Wexler, I assume you have sensed the group of essence users approaching."

"I have."

"Would you like me to scout them out and make an assessment of their capabilities and intentions?"

"Please. I just hope they're hostiles. After that tentacle monster, I'd love to run into something there's an actual point to punching. Especially if it has a face."