

Chapter 613

Uncharacteristic Sincerity

Melody woke up in a small pond, her head pounding. She opened her eyes and saw massive amounts of destruction above her, something having ravaged the inside of Asano's cloud building. It had destroyed the room she was in and dumped her all the way down into the mostly intact atrium.

She was in the waterfall pond that was the atrium's centrepiece, but the damage meant the waterfall no longer fell into it. As she got to her feet, dripping wet, she saw the water was currently spilling from a hole in the lowest mezzanine level.

Melody had only briefly been in the atrium, accompanying her daughter as they talked in spaces more pleasant than her cell. Her accommodations were far from uncomfortable, but there was something about open space and natural light that even the plushiest of beds couldn't make up for. She looked around, her eyes lingering on the transparent wall that showed a wide expanse of sky. Her gaze then drifted down, to the doors.

"That would be a less than ideal decision, Ms Jain," a prim voice said. One of Asano's shadow minions emerged from her shadow.

"Looks like your employer is having a rough day," Melody told Shade.

"This is hardly a rough day for Mr Asano," Shade told her. "The day you met him was a rough day. Not in his top five, but perhaps top ten."

"He almost died that day."

"Yes," Shade said. "Almost. Now, if you'll follow me please?"

"What's going on in here?" she asked as she followed the shadow man.

"Some gold rankers broke in and detonated some manner of device."

"Where are they now?"

Rather than Shade, she was answered by pained screams coming from above.

"Oh dear," Soramir said as Rufus' opponent entered the arena from the large doors at the end.

"What is it?" the Storm King asked.

"If I'm not mistaken, that young man is using the classic sword master combination of sword, swift, adept and master."

"Ah," the king said.

Jason noticed that Liara looked confused.

“It’s the combination used by arguably the world’s greatest swordsman,” Jason explained.

“What’s the issue with that?” Liara asked.

“This fellow is about to duel with that swordsman’s grandson.”

“Oh, dear.”

Different magical abilities led to different physiques amongst adventurers, although they showed in different ways. There was something of a default, which was the lean athleticism of a track and field champion. The variations came from those whose powers gave them physical prowess above their baseline attributes, and they didn’t always present in the same way.

Gary, Farrah and Neil all had comparable levels of strength, yet each looked different. Gary was built like a furry powerlifter, while Neil was more like a bodybuilder who didn’t know how to dress himself properly. Farrah’s physique was bulked out more than the average essence user while remaining lean enough that she could hide it under the right clothes. She was nowhere near the bodybuilder physique that Neil sported.

Essence users more focused on speed maintained a healthy athleticism, but trended more sleek and lithe. Sophie’s lissom body was somewhere between a nymph and a knife, and the swordsman facing off against Rufus had a similar feel. His clothes and physique were both light, and while the sword at his waist was a sabre, his body felt as sharp and pointed as a rapier.

Rufus had the standard physique for an essence user, which still made him look like an Olympic decathlete. Like his opponent, he wore light armour, but with stiffer panels over areas that could afford less flexibility. The magical materials still provided the mobility to make full use of his speed and silver-rank attributes, but forewent the absolute freedom of movement that more acrobatic power sets required.

The pale grey tones of Rufus’ armour contrasted his midnight skin and the sword he conjured into his hand. It was a golden scimitar with ornate red scrollwork etched into the blade. He held it down by his side where the air around it combusted into golden flames that flared for a moment before settling to wreath the blade.

“I wonder if he’s ever set his pants on fire doing that?” Jason wondered, observing from the royal viewing booth. It was rather like an owner’s box at a sports stadium, with a mix of standing room, seating and a loaded buffet table. “I bet he has. What’s this other guy’s name?”

“Glenn Twenhey,” Liara said.

“Glen 20?” Jason asked. “Where I come from, that’s stuff you spray after taking a poo.”

The royalty surrounding him all looked in his direction.

“What?” Jason asked. “There are fewer essence users where I come from, so toilets are a much bigger deal. Unlike you lot, even rich people need to be aware of poo-related infrastructure.”

“Jason,” Liara hissed. “Stop saying ‘poo’ in front of the king.”

“Why? Does he have a weird fetish or something? Your Majesty, I’m just assuming you have a good crystal wash supplier.”

“Perhaps, Mr Asano,” Soramir said, “You could focus on the duel before us.”

“They’re still just staring at each other like anime characters.”

“Then how about to stop talking about poo, shut your damn mouth and show a modicum of respect while you wait quietly?” Liara asked. This drew all the gazes to her, but Jason quietly moved to the front of the booth, standing next to Liara as he looked out. He activated a small privacy screen to incorporate just the two of them.

“Is that better?” he asked lightly.

“You are not helping my standing in the royal family, Asano. You’re a bad influence.”

“Yet, here you are, alongside the king and his great, great whatever grandad.”

“Stern Jason, remember?”

“Yeah, I gave up on that. Stern Jason is for murdering people, so you really shouldn't ask for him. Also, he's kind of a prick, although regular Jason is talking in third person, so there's pros and cons either way, I guess.”

“Why are you always like this?”

“Why do people participating in oppressive systems of governance always act like being too casual is some grave transgression?”

“Oh, just shut up.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Liara glared at him.

“You and Baseph,” he asked. “Is that an open relationship thing?”

“Asano, I was an Adventure Society investigator for longer than you have been alive, so when I tell you that I will hide your corpse where magic won't find it, you would do very well to believe me.”

Like Rufus, his opponent was human. Glenn was leaning forward, almost like a sprinter on a block. He and Rufus stared at one another in a silence that extended for an entire minute, then a second and a third, neither moving so much as a tremble. Then a voice resonated through the area.

“...just touch this crystal, right?” Jason’s voice boomed.

“Get away from that,” Liara’s voice followed.

“They’re just standing there! Get on with it Rufus, you dill pickle! I don’t have all—”

Jason’s voice was cut off, but the audience and Rufus’ opponent were all looking in the direction of the royal viewing booth. Stewards were escorting Jason out, with an angry-looking princess trailing behind.

“That’s the man everyone’s been talking about?” Glenn asked Rufus.

“Yeah,” Rufus said with a grin. “It’s good to have him back.”

“...defeated the entire point of the exercise and ruined my reputation while you were at it,” Liara railed as she led Jason into the booth where his companions were.

“I said it wouldn’t work,” Neil said, turning at their entrance along with the rest of Jason’s friends. “I kept saying it, but did anyone listen to me? No, they did not. We should have just snuck off in the night.”

“He’s not wrong,” Farrah said.

“Not wrong?” Neil asked. “Can’t you just say that I’m right?”

“It feels like that would set a bad precedent,” Farrah told him.

“Did they start fighting yet?” Jason asked, looking out the glass viewing wall.

“No,” Farrah said. “And what have you been doing to Liara?”

“How he treats me is secondary to how he keeps disrespecting the royal family.”

“I’m not feeling like it’s a positive relationship from their end, either,” Jason said.

“Do you have no respect for the concept of royalty at all?” Liara asked.

“Nope.”

“No.”

“He does not.”

“Not even a little.”

“I’m a republican, bro.”

“You’re a Republican?” Travis asked Taika incredulously.

“Australian republican,” Taika explained. “It means I want to stop using someone else’s Queen as a loaner.”

“What they said,” Jason agreed. “Didn’t you read my file front to back? I should have been in there.”

“It mentioned problems with authority,” Liara said. “Not some kind of anti-monarchical bent.”

“That’s about as significant an understatement as I’ve ever heard,” Farrah said.

“Gods and great astral beings make him their personal enemy,” Humphrey pointed out. “What does he have to do, hire a town crier?”

“I respect people one at a time, Liara,” Jason said. “I respect you. But if your family had left me alone, I’d be in my house that hadn’t been blown up right now and wouldn’t give your family a second thought.”

“Asano, this isn’t just some game.”

“Yes, Liara,” he said the amusement in his voice turned to weariness. “It is.”

“We’re talking about one of the most prominent kingdoms in the world,” Liara said.

“Yes,” Farrah agreed. “And while your aristocracy was fighting over scraps of influence, Jason was fighting to save his world and blunt the invader coming for this one. What is one kingdom to him?”

Liara sighed, her shoulders slumping.

“Asano, would it really hurt you to keep your mouth shut and do what you’re told for one damn night?”

“Yes,” Arabelle said, turning from where she had been sitting quietly, watching her son in the arena below. “Yes, it would. Tell the good princess why, Gareth.”

“From the moment he was pulled into this world,” Gary said, “Jason has been told to bow to power. If he ever did, he’d be dead, I’d be dead and most of the people I love would be dead. If you ever see Jason bow, Princess, you should start running because he’s probably about to kill everyone. And I think we all know by now that only being silver rank won’t stop him.”

“I’ve seen him do it,” Taika added. “The killing everyone part, not the bowing. He’s done it on TV.”

“That’s like a recording crystal that everyone in the world can watch,” Farrah explained. “And everyone did watch.”

“He’s super famous in my world,” Taika said. “Controversial, sure, but famous.”

“You asked for a certain version of Jason,” Arabelle said, “as if he were a different person. But he’s not. That part of him that is holding those men in his cloud house right now is a part of him, the way that Liara Rimaros and Princess Liara are parts of you,

different, yet part of a whole. Which is why Princess Liara is unhappy about how this is going, while Liara Rimaros recognises that Jason would have been a lot better off if you and your family had left him alone. Perhaps you should do that now, and let cooler heads prevail so we can talk this through later.”

“That... is sound advice,” Liara acknowledged. “I will find you at your pagoda after this is all done, Asano. I want to see who these people are coming after you.”

Jason nodded his acknowledgement and she left.

“Thank you,” Jason said, his voice breaking up a little. “I’d almost forgotten what it felt like to have people stand up for you.”

“Just to be clear, I didn’t,” Neil said from the buffet table. “I think you should have kept quiet and went along for once.”

“Weren’t you the guy who’s been saying this wouldn’t work the whole time?” Travis asked him.

“Someone on this team has to be the sensible one. That’s why I let everyone know that I was going to be right – which I was – and then accepted the reality and made the most of this buffet.”

“I’m surprised they got it set up so quick,” Jason said. “Those palace stewards don’t muck about.”

“They are very admirable,” Shade agreed from Jason’s shadow.

“I suppose the rush is why there isn’t much food, compared to the tables in the ballroom.”

“Oh, there was plenty,” Farrah said, looking at Gary.

Jason let out a sigh.

“If you’d all permit me a moment of uncharacteristic sincerity, I’d like to thank you. On Earth, it was me and Farrah against the world, more often than not, and I barely made it through intact. I’m still not completely sure I did. We were both on the ragged edge.”

“You more than me,” Farrah clarified and Jason laughed.

“Yes, me more than you. I forgot what it was to have a whole family who would stand up for you against anyone, whatever the circumstances. I guess I’m trying to thank you all for reminding me of that tonight.”

Gary moved away from the food table to embrace Jason in a bone-crushing hug.

“Oh, hey,” Clive said. “Rufus finally started fighting.”

“Oh, the duel,” Taika said. “I totally forgot why we were here.”