

Chapter 507

The Days They Sing Songs About

Trenchant returned to Soramir's balcony lounge after escorting Farrah away, finding the diamond-ranker mid-conversation with Princess Liara. He stood at attention, remaining quiet.

"I would have like to ask more on what she said about starting the monster surge," Liara asked. "I didn't sense any lie from her, but is that even possible?"

"I had already suspected something along those lines," Soramir told her. "There has been speculation of interference in the natural process of the monster surge for some time. A possible scenario is that Asano and Hurin found a means to negate that interference. I would very much like to know more about their absence from our world, but I'm sure you'll agree that this was not the moment to push."

"I do, ancestral majesty."

"Commander Moore, what is your opinion of Miss Hurin?"

Trenchant spent a moment collecting his thoughts.

"She is passionate. Loyal. Brave. She was terrified to come here and confront all of us but she did so unflinchingly, knowing we could feel her fear and see through any lies. She has steel running through her."

"Do you think it was a sensible move, coming here and talking to us like that?" Liara asked him.

"They don't write songs about sensible, your highness."

A smile crossed Soramir's face as he turned to gaze out over the palace rooftops.

"These are exciting times," he said. "The days they sing songs about. Such days belong to the bold and the courageous."

"And the lucky," Liara said. "Most of the bold and courageous die early and easy."

"Yes," Soramir said. "But Asano has already done that. Let's see where he goes from here."

"What will you do about his team?" Liara asked. "We've committed to bringing them here as quickly as we can, now. Will you push the Adventure Society? I don't think Vesper wants things escalated to the point of your intervention becoming widely known. It will also burn some of the family's goodwill with the Adventure Society."

"One of the reasons I agreed was that Miss Hurin all but confirmed a suspicion of mine that may help us in that regard. It requires my owing a favour, but that can be an

advantage in and of itself. A favour owed to the right person can help you establish a valuable connection.”

“You founded the Rimaros dynasty,” Liara said. “Who is qualified to even be owed a favour by you? And what connection can't you make just by turning up?”

“Both Jason Asano and Farrah Hurin have been telling us that there are larger interests in play than those of our dynasty. I think, perhaps, it is time we started to listen.”

Jason was striding across the Adventure Society campus in his blood robes, heading for the jobs hall. Shade's voice spoke from Jason's shadow.

“Mr Asano, another messenger bird has arrived at the cloud house.”

Adventure Society messenger birds were small construct creatures, the written messages they carried were unlocked by the aura of the intended recipient, or destroyed if the bird was tampered with. For people like Jason, impervious to the bird's tracking magic, they were less efficient and had to be sent to fixed destination points. Jason has his destination assigned to the cloud house, where the Shade body left to manage the building could contact him at need.

“The timetable for your contract has been moved up,” Shade continued. “You have been directed to attend the jobs hall by the turn of the hour or you will be deemed non-participatory in the contract waiting for you. The message directs you to the Jobs hall's priority contract office instead of the main centre.”

Jason didn't respond other than to change the direction in which he was walking.

“Perhaps you should decline this contract, Mr Asano.”

Jason still didn't respond.

“Mr Asano, I feel obligated to point out that you can sometimes enter a certain frame of mind where the choices you make are ones you ultimately come to regret.”

“What's one more regret?” Jason snarled, then his expression softened. “Thank you for your concern, Shade. But that is concern enough.”

Jason found the priority contracts office within the jobs hall, where he didn't have to wait long.

“Sorry for the last-moment change, Mr Asano,” the Adventure Society functionary told Jason as she handed over his documentation. “If you head out that door, past Trade Hall C and turn left, you'll come to Marshalling Yard H. It's the smaller one on the right; there are signs posted.”

Jason nodded, stowed the documents in his inventory and left.

Unlike Greenstone and its single marshalling yard, the Rimaros Adventuring Society had many. It was functionally no different, just a gathering place for adventurers about to head on contracts. Marshalling Yard H was one of the smaller ones, set amongst the gardens that spread through most of the campus. There were benches around the edges, although only two of the gathered expedition members were using them.

The gold-rank expedition leader, Jeni Kavaloa, was checking her pocket watch. The guild team had arrived, along with the bulk of the independents. She wasn't happy about being saddled with the mixed group, especially since the late inclusion of two princesses told her that the reasons behind it were political. She detested people playing games with Adventure Society activities, which were life and death affairs.

There were still three people who still hadn't arrived, presumably missing the notification of the time change. The eleven they had, plus Jeni herself, were enough that they didn't need to call on supplementary forces. There was also a little time until the portal specialist arrived at the turn of the hour for more people to arrive.

The six-person guild team were standing easy and relaxed. They were typical of their kind. Young and at the low end of silver-rank, they were still flush with their team's first successes independent of gold-rank supervision. Being back under a gold-ranker for this expedition had them chafing at the bit and looking for a fight.

Stuck waiting, the place they had to look was with the loose adventurers assigned to the expedition. It was unusual to mix guild and non-guild except for large operations or specific reasons. The fact that two of the other adventurers were royalty made the political games being played even more obvious.

The guild members were not fool enough to mess with a pair of princesses, who were the only expedition members sitting on the available benches. Instead, the guild people were harassing the other three for fun.

The unaffiliated expedition members were not gullible enough to let themselves be provoked. They had their own ambitions of guild membership and, without family or political connections, that meant showing their professionalism. It wasn't the brash young guild members they wanted to impress but the gold-ranker and the two princesses.

One member of the guild group stood out from the others, standing impassively aside while his fellow guilders teased the independents. Jeni noted that he seemed to know one of the princesses, at least in passing, having nodded greetings on their arrival.

Jeni wasn't happy with this strange soup she had been assigned to supervise. It was a volatile mix that reeked of politics, leaving her with a sense of another shoe, waiting to drop. When she sensed the approach of a strange aura, she felt that it was about to. A

man in dark red robes entered the marshalling yard. His eyes weren't normal, blue and orange with black sclera, and he had scars on his face.

For a silver-ranker, his aura was hard to make out. She was certain that none of the other silver-rankers could see past its façade. Even Jeni herself could barely sense what lay within, but even that disturbed her. Trapped behind the rigid control, it was a maniac in a cage, howling into the dark.

Jeni felt reactions from some of the other adventurers as he appeared. The two princesses recognised him, as did the quiet guild adventurer. She read curiosity and surprise from the guild adventurer, while one of the princesses was wary. The other was an odd mix of trepidation and shame, standing up and staring as the man arrived. This did not go unnoticed by the other adventurers.

The man didn't so much as glance at any of them as he strode up to Jeni. He plucked his contract documentation from a dimensional space and held it out for her inspection. She took it and read it over.

"You only confirmed your participation a few minutes ago."

He met her gaze evenly, not intimidated by her rank.

"At least you aren't late," she said. "Barely. I would recommend that you be more prompt when it comes to contracts, Mr Asano. When you are not, it makes things more difficult for the administration. They have enough problems to deal with already without unnecessarily adding more."

Jason nodded, moving to an empty bench away from everyone else and sat, gazing down at the ground in front of him. One of the guild members, deciding that the other trio were no sport, sauntered in Jason's direction.

"What about you, new guy? Think you've got what it takes to—"

The guild member skittered back like he'd touched a hot stove when Jason raised his head to meet the guild member's gaze. Only the man himself and the gold-rank Jeni had felt the spike of aura lance through the man's aura defences, although everyone felt the result. The man lost his composure as his aura was popped like a soap bubble. It immediately snapped back up, radiating shock, shame and the anger of a man startled by an unexpected moth flying in front of his face.

"Weak," Jason mumbled, his voice gravel as he turned his eyes back to the ground.

Fury covered the man's face and Jeni was about to step in when someone beat her to it. The guild member who recognised Jason stepped forward and placed a restraining hand on his companion's shoulder. The quiet man's aura was calm and stable, helping the angry man settle.

“You know this guy, Orin?” the angry man asked.

“Complications,” Orin said. “Best left alone.”

The leader of the guild team, Korinne, moved up to them.

“That guy spiked one of ours, Orin,” she said. “We’re going to need more than that before we let that pass.”

Orin looked from Jason to Zara, then back to Jason.

“He’s like my uncle.”

Apparently deciding that was enough, Orin walked back to his original position. The other two looked a little pale as they gave Jason another glance.

“Let it go,” Korinne said to her still-angry team member. “You don’t want to make an enemy of the next Amos Pensinata.”

Jeni was glowering at the exchange. Whoever had assembled the expedition roster was like a mad alchemist, throwing volatile ingredients in a pot to see what happened. She narrowed her eyes on Vesper Rimaros, suspecting her of being the alchemist in question.

“Oh yeah,” she muttered to herself. “This is going to go great.”

The hour came and the last two members didn’t arrive before the gold-rank portal specialist. Jeni knew the man in passing but, also knew how in-demand his time was at the moment, so they didn’t exchange more than quick nods before he opened a portal and she ushered the group through. The portal user was not tasked to follow them, so the group would need to make its own way back.

The small expedition emerged from the portal into an abandoned village, surrounded by jungle. The population had been evacuated to a fortress, the livestock they were forced to abandon left behind now mostly-devoured carcasses. The quadrupedal lizard creatures were similar to cows in nature, used for milk and meat. Common practice was to set them loose, to draw monsters away from the empty village, but these had wandered into the township instead of the wilderness. Whichever monsters had roamed through and killed them hadn't done much damage to the buildings, so the residents would return to largely intact homes.

The town’s emptiness reminded Jason of the rural towns of Earth, abandoned during the monster waves. He had seen plenty of them as he roamed around, hunting for the right nodes to recalibrate the link between worlds. That task was not entirely complete, but until the monster surge was over the dimensional forces at play would make any attempt to modify the link on this side pointless.

Jeni gathered the group together to update them on the contract.

“As you know, we were going to investigate potential Builder cult activity around an astral space aperture. The scouts monitoring the target site sent updated information that a group of Builder cultists did, indeed move in on it, which is why they backed off and sent work back. The timeline was stepped up and here we are. Unfortunately, the cult has had that intervening time to get in, start whatever they are up to and fortify against people like us coming to stop them.”

An icy cloud formed at her feet.

“We are going to be moving fast as we can without risking drawing monster attention,” she announced. “Asano, I’m told you have communications and scouting abilities.”

➤ [You have received a party invitation from \[Jason Asano\]. Accept Y/N?](#)

Seven Shade bodies rose from Jason’s shadow and dashed off into the jungle. The guild team’s leader, Korinne, spoke up.

“Ma’am, our team scout is reliable. Perhaps we should use her instead of relying on an independent’s familiars.”

Jeni didn’t let her unhappiness show. She had seen that the stoic Orin held an amount of respect within the guild team and she’d been hoping his influence would keep a lid on things. Korinne, however, was unwilling to let Jason’s blow to the pride of her team member slide. Jeni looked at Korinne, then turned to the woman she knew to be the guild team’s scout.

“Rosa Liselos, isn’t it? What do you say, Liselos? Can you do better than Asano’s shadows?”

Liselos glanced at Orin, then flashed an apologetic look at Korinne before turning back Jeni.

“No, ma’am. My senses are sharper than most and I’ve already lost track of them. I can’t hide any better than that.”

Jeni turned back to Korinne.

“Anything else to say about how I’m commanding this expedition?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Correct.”

Jeni then addressed the group at large.

“We’re moving out,” she ordered. “Keep those auras restrained; no point letting them see us coming until we have to. We’ll rely on scouting to keep us secure. Liselos, you’ll sweep our wake to make sure nothing is stalking us.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The expedition members took out various means of personal transport, from powers like Jeni’s floating ice cloud to construct creatures kept in dimensional storage. Shade took the form of a saddled panther-like creature with a long body and eight legs. It had glowing white fangs, claws and eyes. Jason slid into the saddle on its back and the group moved out.