

Chapter 617

Put the Extraordinary Aside

A large flying carriage landed on the lawn in front of Jason's pagoda. Jason and his companions emerged, along with Liara, and Jason immediately walked up to the pagoda doors, which opened at his approach. As soon as they did, water came spilling out onto the grass. It was far from a flood, but enough to demonstrate that the massive atrium floor had been flooded to at least a couple of centimetres deep.

Like the night outside, the interior was dark. That did not obscure Jason's vision, but he still conjured his cloak, from which a swarm of tiny star lights emerged. They swept up into the building, growing brighter as they went. The massive destruction that had taken place on the building's interior became plain for all to see. It was clear that some force, not explosive but annihilating, had essentially deleted a sphere almost as wide as the building itself. Several floors were all but absent while others were damaged to various degrees, including the mezzanine levels. The waterfall was now spilling through a hole rather than over an edge into the pool, which was the source of the shallow flooding.

"Damn," Gary said. "Are you going to deal with the guys who did this?"

High above, one of the intact sections of floor opened up and a small group of rot-black meat lumps dropped out, falling some seven storeys to smack wetly into the floor.

"No," Jason said. "These people were idiots being used by someone else. Liara, you're better equipped to investigate the man behind the curtain than I am, and a revenge spree is a little public for someone who's meant to be in another dimension."

"Now you hand over prisoners," Liara said. "I don't suppose you want to throw in Melody Jain? Assuming she didn't take the opportunity to break out."

"Definitely not," a voice came from above and Melody dropped from a high floor, forgoing slow fall abilities to make a superhero landing before standing up and gesturing at what was left of the gold rankers on the floor. What was left did not include limbs.

"Asano did this to people while attending a party, portal distance away, behind what has to be formidable communication-restricting magic. I decided then and there that not only was I not going to make a break for it without a lot of confidence in my plan, but also that Asano probably wasn't in the best of moods, based on what he did to these poor saps, anyway."

"That was a good choice," Sophie told her mother. "He soul attacked a guy in front of the king until Soramir Rimaros stepped in to stop him."

"And what did the king do about that?" Melody asked.

“Not sure,” Sophie said. “Had another drink?”

Melody looked over at Jason, still shrouded in his cloak.

“You just keep getting scarier, don’t you? Is that a deliberate thing, or does it just happen?”

Jason pushed back the hood to reveal his face, which left him looking like his head was sticking out of a portal.

“That’s creepy, bro. I’m into it.”

“Everyone get packing,” Jason said. “I’m reconfiguring the house to a vehicle, so there’ll be less room to play with.”

Liara was directing Adventure Society personnel to put the beleaguered gold rankers into a secure transport carriage. Once they were clear of the cloud house, its defences stopped ravaging them. The potent recuperative strength of their gold-rank recovery attributes turned them back into recognisable people by the time the magical flying paddy wagon arrived. They were all collared as they were placed inside, completely docile. None of them was acting out or speaking at all, which was remarkable for any group of gold rankers. They just looked relieved, even eager, to be taken away from the pagoda.

Suddenly, Soramir Rimaros was standing next to her. If she’d been silver rank instead of gold, his diamond-rank speed would have been indistinguishable from teleportation. He turned on his formidable privacy screen, cutting off the various observers still watching the pagoda.

“He’s still trouble,” Soramir said.

“If I might ask, Ancestral Majesty, why do you let him run so rampant? I know that there’s no way the king would have put up with his antics without you telling him to.”

Soramir thought about it for a moment.

“The healer from Asano’s team, Neil Davone,” he said. “He’s a capable enough mid-rank adventurer from a minor noble house in some city-state no one would ever have heard of if not for the Geller family. Under normal circumstances, would I even know the name of the person I just described?”

“Unlikely, Ancestral Majesty.”

“Out in the cosmos, that’s me. There is no reason I would ever come to the attention of the First Sister of the World-Phoenix. That’s who Jason’s friend Dawn is. Or was. She’s moved onto some more nebulous rank. In the cosmic realms, I’m just a face in the crowd and she is a blazing sun. But just as I know who Young Master Davone is because of Jason, she knows who I am because of Jason as well.”

"You're saying that he operates in prestigious circles. We knew that from the great astral beings and gods visiting him. Just about where we're standing, in fact."

"I'm not sure you understand how prestigious. He's already at a level where he needs to deal with me instead of the king for his actual objectives, because the king isn't enough. The only reason he's dealing with any of our family is that we dragged him into our politics. And we still failed to marry any of ours off to him; I knew we should have focused on that more heavily. Actually, now that I say it, I heard that your daughter—"

"No."

"No?"

"No, Ancestral Majesty."

"You know I meant your younger daughter, Zareen?"

"And you know I meant that while you can order my family members as part of House Rimaros, you were also acknowledging that you cannot give orders that intervene in my family dynamic. Ancestral Majesty."

Soramir chuckled.

"Asano is a good influence on you. You're an important part of the family, with your position in the Adventure Society, but you let your peripheral position in the royal family make you timid. You're going to need to hold your ground more and more, Liara. I expect to see more of that in the future."

"I'll do my best, Ancestral Majesty."

"My point," Soramir said, "is that the troubles of a royal family are significantly below the level Asano is operating at. There are things I won't tell you; secrets that belong to Asano that would cause him no small consternation should they come out. What I will say is that Asano isn't really a silver ranker. He's a very dangerous diamond ranker that hasn't caught up to his natural rank yet. I'm confident that he'll be younger than you are now when he reaches diamond rank, assuming he survives that long."

"I need to go, Ancestral Majesty," Liara said, indicating the security carriage about to lift off.

"Of course. Please attend to your duties."

As Liara departed, Jason emerged from the building, entering Soramir's privacy screen.

"You know you don't need this thing," Jason told him. "You could just pop inside."

"I'll decline, thank you. And you should be careful about who you let in there, given what you've become."

"I wondered if you realised, given your experiences in the wider cosmos."

“The vast majority of astral kings are messengers, Mr Asano. With a war with the messengers in the offing, that’s not going to make you a popular figure if people find out.”

“I imagine it won’t. But laying low is the plan, so I’ll do my best to avoid standing out.”

“And how good is your best in that regard?”

“It’s probably best you don’t ask,” Jason said.

“Once you send your friends on their way, Mr Asano, come to the palace. Officially, we’ll be in seclusion until our departure is announced. In reality, I will have you portalled to them.”

“Rather than that,” Jason said, “you can take one of my familiar’s bodies back with you. He can wear my conjured cloak and occasionally be spotted in the palace after I’m gone.”

“That will work?”

“He can mimic my retracted aura well enough that anyone who can see through it will have to be either rudely focused with their senses or someone like you or Amos Pensinata.”

“That should suffice, then.”

“Which makes this the last time we’ll see each other for some time. I hope that it will be as equals, instead of my stature being propped up by association with the people around me.”

“And by the ones that aren’t people.”

“Gods and great astral beings are people, Soramir,” Jason said firmly. “They’re just weird and powerful.”

Soramir laughed.

“I said something funny?” Jason asked.

“Oh yes, Mr Asano. I think I just understood you a little more, and how you wound up where you are. It’s one thing to say that these vast entities are fundamentally the same as us when you’ve never felt their power pressing down on you. I know from experience that once you have, that perspective is harder to maintain.”

“Almost everyone I deal with dwarfs me in power,” Jason said. “Look at you and me. You get used to it.”

“If I’m not mistaken, neither of us ages anymore. I’m curious about how your point of view has shifted the next time we meet.”

“If I reach that point, I’ll call it a win. I seem to go from one desperate attempt to cling to life to the next.”

“Which is the point of our current efforts, is it not? To put the extraordinary aside for a while and live as much of an ordinary life as you can, given secret identities and secret agendas?”

“It is. But I’ve had hopes like that before.”

Soramir nodded.

“What you’ve faced all came around two ranks too early,” he said.

“Tell me about it,” Jason said, then looked up at an approaching flying carriage, massively oversized and covered in metal plating.

“Preparation continues unabated, Ancestral Majesty; we should go, which means it’s time to drop the privacy screen.”

Soramir nodded. Once it was once again possible to eavesdrop, Jason started the show.

“My cloud flask isn’t developed enough to be useful where we’re going,” he said. “I’m going to leave it here with one of my shadow familiars, because he can use it. He’ll essentially be another auxiliary, in charge of transport and accommodation.”

Jason plucked the cloud flask’s shrunken form from his necklace and it grew to normal size. A Shade body emerged from the pagoda and Jason handed it over.

“It won’t do anyone any good to steal it,” Jason told Shade, “but some idiot probably will try anyway, so don’t let them.”

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

“I left the materials to fix it up after the damage inside, so use them before you break down the pagoda.”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

After a handful of other instructions, Jason wrapped himself completely in his cloak, such that no one notice him shadow jump and leave a Shade body in his place.

“Have you said your goodbyes?” Soramir asked.

“I did that away from prying eyes,” Jason’s voice came from the disguised Shade.

“Then we’re done here,” Soramir said.

Carlos watched them leave, having disembarked from the heavily modified vehicle that landed during Jason and Soramir's conversation. It looked like a mix of double-decker, oversized tour bus and prison transport. After Jason refused to house the Order of Redeeming Light in his soul space, Carlos had been forced to make custom arrangements. The vehicle was part mobile prison, part hospital and part accommodation for Carlos and his research assistants.

The Shade that had accepted the cloud flask led Carlos into the pagoda.

"I still don't understand why Jason wouldn't just accommodate the Order of the Redeeming Light people himself," Carlos complained. "He's already holding Melody Jain."

"Ms Jain is a special case," Shade informed him as they reached the doors. "Holding hostiles in his own home can have..."

Shade paused as the doors opened and they went inside.

"...ramifications."

Carlos craned his head back to look at the destruction to the pagoda's interior. Jason's cloak lights had been replaced with an array of floating glow stones so that no one stumbled of any ledges.

"What did this?" Carlos asked.

"Hostiles in Mr Asano's home," Shade said. "Do come along, Priest Quildo."