

Chapter 604

If You're Going to Punish Someone

Maldonado's team whirled at the unexpected voice. A man was walking out of the jungle and over the ritual line at the edge of the base camp. He was wearing dark red combat robes, not voluminous like a scholar's robe, but still draping loosely. He was not tall, but he had the lean athleticism of an adventurer. His features were sharp, with a pointed chin under a neatly trimmed beard. His dark hair was glossy, shining in the sunlight.

His presence was unsettling for two reasons. One was his eyes, with black sclera and irises that weren't irises. They were made up of blue and orange energy that was similar to an iris, but not quite the same. The result was an uncanny-valley alienness, like something inhuman wearing human skin.

Strange eyes were far from unheard of amongst adventurers, however. What genuinely unnerved them was that they couldn't sense his aura. At all. Looking at someone and sensing nothing was something that almost all adventurers had experienced at one point or another. It was what happened when someone higher rank was about to make a point. They knew Asano wasn't higher rank than them; it just felt like it.

"He's alone," said Nuñez nervously. He was one of Maldonado's team members.

"Shut up, Nuñez," Maldonado scolded. "You don't walk out in front of this many people without knowing something they don't."

A predatory smile teased at the corners of Jason's mouth. A portal arch rose up behind him and the rest of his team emerged, forming a row behind him. Maldonado walked out from his team to meet Jason and they stopped in front of one another. Maldonado was taller by half a head, with tan skin and hawkish features. A celestine, his hair and eyes were onyx black.

"You're him," Maldonado said.

"I'm him."

"It was never going to work, was it?"

"There's always someone like you. Someone who fails to make a name for themselves during the surge, then tries to make one on the back of a more successful adventurer. They watch out for that kind of thing."

Maldonado narrowed his eyes.

"But they don't stop it," he realised. "They let the successful adventurer demonstrate where their success came from."

“If it’s viable. You did a lot better than most, so I’m told. You did deliberately leak your plan to Rangel and the other group, right?”

“Yes. The idea was to soften you up. Draw you into the open and strike.”

“You made a lot of preparations. You don’t seem like someone who needs to take this approach. I’d think you would do just fine playing it straight as an adventurer. Why gamble on this?”

“Family,” Maldonado said. “A nobleman married into our family and—”

“That sounds like a long story,” Jason said, cutting him off. “I don’t care that much. At the end of the day, what matters is what you did, what I did, and where we go from here.”

“And where is that?”

Jason moved away from Maldonado, looking around their base camp as he slowly meandered. There were skimmers designed to hover over jungle canopy, crates full of resources and Maldonado’s team.

“You really went all out,” he observed. “There were people who suggested that the authorities deal with this, instead of leaving it between adventurers. That you’d pulled in too many people and used too many resources for me to handle. Can you guess why I insisted on doing this myself?”

“To prove that you can?”

“No,” Jason said, softly enough that only the sensitive ears of silver-rankers allowed the others to hear. “That’s what Adventure Society wants. What the royal family want. What all the people with a vested interest in me not haring off and doing something drastic want. But I’m past the point in my life where I care about proving things. It doesn’t change anything and it doesn’t stop people like you or the Builder or gods from interfering in my life, even though they fall short EVERY DAMN TIME!”

Jason paused. Despite not needing to breathe he drew in a slow, calming breath. He turned back to look at Maldonado, and when he spoke again, his voice was quiet once again.

“The reason I came out here myself - why I started putting people down with my own hands – is because you brought trouble to my friend to get to me. That made me angry. I wanted to punish you; no points to make or reputation to build. My first instinct was to make sure the only part of you that left this jungle was the part I washed off my hands, after.”

Jason’s face took on a sincere, friendly smile as Maldonado was finally able to perceive Jason’s aura. To Maldonado’s senses, Jason’s aura seemed as authentic and amiable as his expression. It sent chills down his back.

“I’ve been in this situation before,” Jason said. “I spent a lot of time in an emotionally dark place because of people like you. People who thought they could get something from me and didn’t care who they hurt in the process. I don’t, strictly speaking, regret all the killing, but I regret that I had to do it.”

Jason let out a little laugh.

“Listen to me,” he said affably, as if every person on the clearing wasn’t completely focused on him. “I sound like a domestic abuser. As I said: an emotionally dark place.”

His smile turned sad, his aura radiating regret, but also hope.

“But I’m better now. I don’t do that kind of thing anymore. It’s just hard, you know? Avoiding the harmful patterns of the past. Take you, for example. You saw a pathway to something you wanted and didn’t care about going through the people around me to get it. In my world that’s what they call a trigger; something that might cause you to go back to old, destructive habits. Well, cause *me* to go back to old habits. To regress.”

Jason walked forward into Maldonado’s personal space. Close enough to smell his fear, if it hadn’t been plain to see in his aura.

“You don’t want me to regress do you, Mr Maldonado?”

Maldonado shook his head.

“Great,” Jason said, beaming a bright smile as he backed away from Maldonado.

“You saw the attention on me and thought it was the people watching me that made me important. That if you humiliated me, they would be watching you instead, making you important. You believed that I was vulnerable. Soft.”

“And he’s not soft,” Belinda called out. “He’s harder than a fifteen-year-old boy getting a titty massage.”

Every person in the clearing turned to look at her.

“What?” she asked. “I’m helping.”

“Remember the discussion we had about setting a tone?” Humphrey told her.

“Belinda,” Jason called out to her, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Please refrain from using the word ‘titty’ while I’m attempting to monologue.”

“I told you that serious Jason was never going to work,” Neil muttered, earning him a glare from Humphrey.

“Well, that’s ruined,” Jason said. “I had this whole speech about consequences and the choice between ruthlessness and mercy. Humphrey, should I just cut my losses and kill them all? It’s not exactly the point I was going to make, but it’ll do.”

Maldonado’s team had already been on a knife’s edge, and Jason’s offhand had them reaching for weapons.

“Everyone stand down,” Maldonado called out. “He’s not going to kill us.”

“Try and kill us, you mean,” said Reyes, a member of Maldonado’s team.

“You heard him talk about the authorities,” Maldonado said. “They won’t let him just massacre a group of adventurers. He kept the prisoners alive, remember? Whatever is going to happen, he can’t kill us.”

Jason stared at Maldonado for a long time as both teams looked on, ready to spring into action.

“That’s sound reasoning,” Jason said finally. “What do you think, Jana?”

The gold-ranker revealed herself with a shimmer.

“The point was to prove you could deal with them without calling on a gold ranker,” she told him.

“I don’t need you to deal with them. I need you to tell them what happens if I kill them all.”

“Well, Princess Liara is going to yell at you.”

Jason gave her a flat look.

“Fine,” Jana acknowledged. “She’s going to yell at me. And the Adventure Society won’t be happy. Or his Ancestral Majesty. Actually, I don’t know about him; he lets you get away with everything. You will certainly be disinvented to the celebration ball. Well, *almost* certainly. There are things that need to be... okay, you’ll probably still be invited, but you’ll get some moderately disapproving looks.”

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “You’re trying to give up killing adventurers, remember?”

“Fine,” Jason unhappily conceded. “I’m not just letting this slide, though. These people have to pay.”

“It was me,” Maldonado said. “This was all my idea. My team, my plan. I pushed them into it. If you’re going to punish someone, punish me. I’m the one behind it.”

“That’s noble,” Jason said, looking around at Maldonado’s team. “But they’re all here and they knew what they were coming for. They made that choice.”

“What will you do?”

Everyone waited in silence as Jason looked at Maldonado with a contemplative expression.

“The right choice,” he said, “is to wash my hands of you and leave the choice to the Adventurer Society. If it were up to me, I’d have all your Adventure Society memberships revoked. It would probably happen, in different times, but while the surge is over, the need for adventures is not. But I’m tired of people’s crappy actions being overlooked because they’re going to be needed.”

“You’re wrong,” Jana told him. “The Adventure Society needs people, but they turned on their own. The society can forgive a lot of sins, but not adventurers turning on one another. How did you think you got away with killing those adventurers in Greenstone? They’d given up adventuring and went after an adventurer in good standing. If you hadn’t dealt with them, the society would have.”

Jason turned to her.

“Really?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, gesturing at Maldonado’s team. “These people were gone the moment they even attempted this plan. I imagine the society will recruit the smart ones as functionaries, though. Very closely monitored, and with crap raining down on them from a very great height. If they can take that and keep their noses clean long enough, they’ll get a pathway back to being adventurers. Until then, they’ll be scooting around after actual adventurers, cleaning up messes like someone who just bought a puppy. The rest will have to find their own way in life. Where do you think the noble houses get their high-ranking house guards? Dregs that were kicked out of the Adventure Society, usually.”

After Jason had ratcheted up the tension, the appearance of a gold ranker had wound things down. Unlike Jason, the vast majority of adventurers were very respectful of rank and the appearance of an authority figure gave them confidence that things would be settled, if not well, then at least non-violently.

Jason’s team moved from where they were lined up in front of the portal to join him.

“It’s time to let it go, Jason,” Clive assured him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“They’ll get what’s coming to them, and they aren’t worth our time.”

“Alright,” Jason said and started moving towards the portal. “Jana is surprisingly good at monologuing.”

“Hey!” Maldonado called out. “You have one of my team members.”

Jason stopped and turned around.

“So?”

Maldonado looked to Jana.

“Don’t expect me to help you,” she told him. “You sent people after him. The condition you get them back in is none of my business.”

Jana then vanished in a shimmer.

“I’m willing to negotiate her release with no further harm,” Maldonado said to Jason, who turned and walked away.

“You don’t have anything I want.”

“You’re not going to the party,” Liara told Belinda.

“Oh, come on. You’re going to make me miss the big fancy party?”

“Jason, against all odds, was actually doing what he was told for once and playing the – admittedly melodramatic – serious adventurer.”

In the cloud pagoda, an angry Liara, with a nervous Rick Geller beside her, was in the middle of reaming out Team Biscuit for going off-message. Sitting with them was Jana, sharing wincing side-glances with Jason.

“Don’t even get me started on you,” Liara told her. “You weren’t meant to be seen at all, let alone doing a double-act with Asano.”

“It’s not like you’ve never been to a big fancy party before,” Sophie consoled Belinda.

“Yeah, but this time I was invited. I was hardly going to steal anything.”

“What?” Liara said, wheeling on her.

“I mean, I’m not going to steal anything. Please let me go to the party.”

“You should probably let her,” Clive advised. “If you don’t, she’ll just try and sneak in.”

“It’s in the royal palace,” Liara said. “I’m sure she’s a fine thief – she’s certainly an enthusiastic one - but there’s no way she won’t get caught.”

“And would her getting caught make things better or worse?” Jason asked. “Your best bet is to let her in the door.”

Liara closed her eyes and groaned.

“My preference would be that you skip this ball and leave right now,” she muttered through gritted teeth.

“Done, we’re bunking off,” Jason said, jumping to his feet. “Everyone out of the building; I need to turn this place into a magic school bus.”

“Stop!” Liara commanded. “Sit down, Mr Asano.”

“Boo,” he jeered as he dropped back into his seat.

“I’ve been telling everyone this wouldn’t work,” Neil said.

“Look,” Liara said. “There are a lot of people doing a lot of things to make this dual-identity scenario work. I’ve seen plenty of follow-up plans if it doesn’t, but they aren’t approaches that you’re going to like. They aren’t approaches that I like, if for no other reason than you’ll disagree with them. I’ve seen how that works out. Just stay in the pagoda, don’t make trouble and we’ll see to it that no one else makes trouble for you.”

“Autumn got her frog familiar?”

Liara’s expression turned evasive.

“What happened?” Jason asked, narrowing his eyes.

“She has her new familiar,” Liara assured him. “She’s still out there, in her familiar’s own environment as she gets to know it. She’s strengthening their bond before she brings it back to civilisation.”

“Is there a problem?” Humphrey asked.

“Well, I imagine you’re aware that if someone gets an essence ability for a frog familiar, such as Miss Leal with her frog essence, that ability covers a wide range of creatures. Any kind of magical frog or frog-like magical beast.”

“I’m getting the impression Autumn’s new familiar is more on the frog-like than the actual-frog end of the scale,” Clive said.

“Her original familiar was from the region where you were all just operating,” Liara said. “There were also frog-type magical beasts where we took her, but it was a different region, with different creatures. She ended up with a familiar not quite like her original one.”

“How not quite like her original one?” Jason asked.

“It’s a long-tongue jumping hydra,” Rick said. “It’s roughly the size of a two-story house.”

“Cottage,” Liara corrected. “It’s the size of a two-storey cottage.”