

## Chapter 736

### What's Wrong With Simple

Bellory watched as the plant essence user restored the old tree that had once formed the bones of her tavern. She could rebuild it but it wouldn't be the same, especially not with the directions from the city officials. It would be bigger than ever, much bigger, spreading across multiple trees. A large establishment for lots of people; part of the morale-building exercises for which the entertainment district had been tapped. A large-scale cafeteria through the day and a place they could forget their troubles at night, if only for a little while.

She looked over at a man hauling building materials that looked like they should crush him under their weight, his feet sinking into the dirt with each step. Valk Vohl seemed like a decent enough man, despite the noxious weeds that were his brother and father. Perhaps he had been one as well, before. She'd seen more than a few people whose decency had been dug out by what had happened.

For so long, her debt to the Vohl family had been a looming axe, waiting to drop. Then her debt had been shifted to more favourable terms, refinanced as part of some noble's conflict with Valk's father, Urman. Bellory hadn't cared so long as it let her squeeze free of the space Urman and Emresh Vohl had crammed her into. She didn't like being a game piece, small and powerless, but life didn't always offer the best choices.

None of that mattered anymore. Old problems like sketchy debts seemed so small now. Or maybe it did matter. People with money and power didn't keep it by letting folks off out of decency. What would happen when her new creditor came calling? Would the government even consider her the owner of this new tavern? She only owned a fragment of the land it would stand on.

As she watched Valk, lost in thought, he almost stumbled, looking with shock at something behind her. She turned, following his gaze to see a familiar face. She couldn't sense his aura, though, as if he weren't there. She swallowed a lump in her throat, not sure how to feel.

"John... no, Jason," she said. "Your real name is Jason Asano."

"Hello Bell," he said. His voice was almost a whisper yet it carried over clearly. His smile was sad, his eyes hinting at loss. "I did tell you that I was a liar."

He was wearing a simple suit, unmarred despite the ash and dust thick in the air. She saw a flake of ash fall onto his suit and slide off, expensive magic keeping it clean. It was a far cry from the floral shirt and short pants he'd been wearing when they met and he went

to work in her kitchen. The kitchen whose remains had been cleared away before reconstruction began.

"I saw you," she said. "In the bunker."

"I know. I sensed your aura. Less fear in it than most."

"I was plenty scared. I don't understand what happened between you and the messenger down there. But I know she was about to come at us. Until you stopped her."

Jason nodded.

"I was scared too. We had barriers around us. Anyone we touched would get hurt. Killed, for most people. All she had to do was charge into the crowd and it would have been a massacre. I probably shouldn't be telling you that, after the fact. I don't imagine it'll help you sleep at night. I was lucky I could get her to stop at all."

"Were you?" Bellory asked. "I didn't just hear you tell her to stop. I felt it. We all did. It wasn't just words, it was... a decree. Like the words of a god. Are you a priest?"

He chuckled, shaking his head.

"No," he told her. "I'm not a priest."

"Then what are you? I know it's not a cook for an adventuring team."

"Actually, I am, from a certain point of view. It's just not all that I am. It's complicated."

"And you live a complicated life, I bet."

"I do."

"And what was I to you? What were you doing playing kitchen hand? A simple little diversion? Tumbling some girl who owns a tavern?"

His expression looked hurt.

"What's wrong with simple?" he asked, then gestured at the city around them. "This is what complicated gets you. And I like being a kitchen hand. My sister is a chef. She's the one who taught me to cook."

"I'm sorry," she said. "That wasn't fair. I'm just confused and so very angry, and I don't know where to put it. People like me don't get to learn the truth people like you deal with."

Jason bowed his head, eyes locked on his feet.

"I want to argue with you," he said. "To tell you that really, I'm a normal guy. That's part of what brought me to your door, I think. The chance to pretend I'm something I'm not anymore."

He looked up, meeting her gaze.

"But I'm not better than you," he implored. "That's not what I'm saying. And you deserve answers. Everyone does, but I can't offer that. If you'd like, I'll answer your

questions. I may have to be a little vague when it comes to dangerous secrets, but I'll do my best."

Bellory nodded.

"Alright. What happened with that messenger girl you were fighting?"

"I told you about the barrier we had around us. One of us had to kill the other or the barrier would kill us both. I found a way to save us both, but I had to do something very bad to her for that to happen."

"Why not just kill her?"

"Lots of reasons. Because a fight could so easily have caught all those people up in it, yourself included. Because the messengers are slaves and they don't even know it. Because my father told me that if I get the choice between ruthlessness and mercy, my choice shouldn't be about the person under my sword but about me."

"What about all the other messengers? You sent them through some portal. Why? Did you help them escape? There are so many rumours."

Jason nodded.

"That's where things get complicated. You might say I helped them. They needed to escape their own people more than mine, so I took them prisoner. They're still there, waiting for me to decide what to do with them. I'll show you if you want, but you should be careful about getting too deeply involved with me."

"Then why are you here?"

"Selfishness, if I'm being honest. You and I had a good time, I think. A beautiful, simple night, and I don't get so many of those."

"Am I in danger?"

"No more than anyone else in this city."

"What does that mean? Is the city in danger?"

"There's always danger, Bell. And there are people to get in between it and the people just trying to live their lives."

He looked sadly around the construction site and the ruined city beyond.

"Sometimes we fail, and I'm sorry about that. There is something. I can't tell you about it, but there will be time to get to safety if we fail."

"If it comes to that, will it mean you're dead?"

"Probably not. I have ways around death."

She let out a disbelieving laugh.

"You have ways around death," she echoed.

He nodded.

“Sure, why not,” she said. “I have another question.”

“Go ahead.”

“When you came in to fight that messenger, why you were only wearing your underpants?”

Jason burst out into laughter.

“I use conjured clothes when I’m fighting. Saves on expensive replacements. If you ever become an adventurer, always spend the most money on underwear. It’s modesty’s last line of defence. That barrier I mention prevented me from using my conjured gear. You saw me put it back on when I overcame the barrier.”

“You have a lot of scars.”

“Yes.”

“Where did they really come from?”

“Fighting the Builder, mostly.”

“Lots of people fought the Builder cult. They didn’t end up covered in scars.”

“I didn’t say the Builder cult. I said the Builder.”

“As in, personally?”

“Again, complicated. But yes.”

“I thought the Builder was some kind of weird god.”

“More or less.”

“Then how do you fight it and live?”

“You don’t.”

“Right, I forgot. You have ways around death.”

“Yes.”

“Do you die a lot?”

“More than most.”

He plucked a piece of card the size of a large envelope out of the air, stepped closer and held it out for her to take. She looked it over, finding it to be a certification from the Church of Death confirming four deaths for Jason Asano, current status: alive.

“You have a certificate?” she asked, looking up from it to his amused face. He was closer now and she could smell him. That enticing fresh spring aroma, strange set against the earthy, acrid stench of the city. She held out the certificate for him to take back and he did, their hands lingering briefly when they touched. Their eyes met and then broke apart as they both averted their gaze. He pushed it into the air where it vanished.

“The Adventure Society can be pedantic about that kind of thing,” he told her. “Due diligence, you know? They don’t like it when their members turn out to be undead abominations, so they check.”

“Sure.”

Unable to look directly at him for a moment, she spotted Valk Vohl, nervously edging closer after putting down his load. Jason followed her gaze to look at the man, who took the chance to speak.

“Mr Asano,” he said, his voice hesitant. “I wanted to thank you for saving my life during the battle. And for not killing my family before the battle.”

Jason looked Valk up and down.

“I remember you,” Jason said. “You were here during the battle. Fighting to protect the bunker. Who are your family that I would kill them?”

“My name is Valk Vohl. My father—”

“Is Urman Vohl,” Jason finished, glancing at Bellory. “I remember. And I remember your brother, coming for Bellory’s tavern, looking for trouble. And later cowering in the bunker when he had the rank to defend it.”

Jason paused, looking Valk up and down.

“The way you did.”

Valk had the stain of hard work on his clothes and smeared into his skin. His face spoke to exhaustion, bags under the eyes. That was not a state easy for a silver-ranker to end up in. There was no question he’d been working relentlessly for weeks. Bellory watched as Jason took Valk’s appearance in for a long, silent moment.

“You stood up when it mattered most,” Jason said finally. “We all have a chance to be better than where we come from. To be better than the mistakes of our past. I need to believe that for myself, so it’s not out of my way to believe it for you.”

Jason sighed, glancing at Bellory again.

“Your father is going to forgive all the debts he is owed,” he told Valk.

“He won’t like that,” Valk said.

“He’ll like it less if I have to tell him in person. Ask your brother what happens when someone crosses me and I’m not a kitchen hand.”

“I haven’t seen my brother since the bunker was evacuated,” Valk said. “We think he fled the city.”

Jason closed his eyes. After a moment he raised a hand and pointed.

“He’s still in the city,” Jason said and opened his eyes. “There’s a displacement camp two kilometres that way. Probably hiding. Easy enough amongst all those people.”

“What would he be hiding from?” Valk asked. “The messengers are gone.”

“From him,” Bellory said, nodding at Jason. “Emresh and his goons gave Joh... Jason a beating. Then he saw what he can do when he’s not pretending to be ordinary.”

Valk nodded, remembering the sight of Jason draining the life force from a messenger. The dead messenger’s scream that Valk only heard through his aura senses, not sure if he imagined it.

“I’ll tell my father.”

Jason turned to Bellory.

“Your debts will be cleared as well.”

“I don’t like being a helpless piece moved around in a game between powerful people who don’t care if I’m knocked off the board,” she said.

Jason nodded.

“The inability to fight for your own fate is a harsh reality,” he said. “And sympathy from me on that is quite hypocritical. Fighting over my fate is all I seem to do, and it’s been pointed out that I don’t always allow others the same luxury. But helping is better than not, even if I am high-handed about it. And while you could rightly accuse me of many things not caring isn’t one of them. There will always be someone to tell you that you don’t matter, but you do. To me, yes, but also, you just do. You matter.”

“It probably won’t help anyway,” Bellory said. “Someone will come along and exploit all this once there’s money to be made again. Take our land somehow and charge us to live on it. If it’s not Urman Vohl it will be someone like him.”

“I’m no economist, and definitely not a politician,” Jason said. “But I know someone. She has the skill set to help you.”

“You mean the princess,” Valk said. “The one from the Storm Kingdom.”

“She’s not a princess,” Jason corrected. “Not right now. Technically. But yes. Shade, please ask Zara to keep an eye on land exploitation during the recovery.”

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

Bellory and Valk looked around for the source of the voice, having sensed no other presence. Jason offered no explanation.

“It was you,” Bellory accused. “You had my loan refinanced.”

“I didn’t want to give you a handout,” he said. “Just a chance to control your own fate a little.”

“It wasn’t just you,” Valk told her. “Everyone in the entertainment district with debts to my father got the same deal.”

“I told you not to go after Urman Vohl,” she told Jason.

"I didn't," Jason said. "I sent a princess to do it."

"You sent a princess."

"She has bit of a crush on me."

Bellory let out an exhausted, disbelieving laugh.

"You weren't kidding about complicated, were you?"

"I was not," he said with a warm smile. "I'm going to go now. I have to catch up with my friends. I am glad to see that you came through that attack alive, Bellory."

"Thank you for making sure I did," Bellory said. "If monsters had come into that bunker instead of you, or if that messenger..."

Bellory shook her head, not completing the thought.

"I'm an adventurer," Jason said. "Protecting people from bad things is what we do."

He turned to look at Valk.

"Try to stop your father from being one of those things, Mr Vohl."

Valk nodded, intelligently remaining silent.

"Will I see you again?" Bellory asked and Jason turned his gaze back to her.

"Do you want to?" he asked.

She didn't answer immediately, giving it some thought.

"No," she said finally. "I know that sounds ungrateful, but your complications could destroy someone like me without anyone even noticing."

Jason gave a slight, sad nod.

"It's not ungrateful," he told her. "It's smart. Which makes me all the sadder that we won't meet again."

He turned back to Valk.

"And you, Mr Vohl, should work very hard to make sure that we don't meet again either."

Jason's shadow rose from the ground behind him, taking on depth and substance as it assumed the shape of a person made from darkness. Jason held Bellory's gaze, his smile sad as he stepped back into the shadow and vanished. The shadow then slid into the shadow of the wall and also disappeared. Bellory and Valk looked at one another before Bellory shrugged.

"I guess we get back to work," she said.