

Chapter 607

A Difficult Child

The tailor, Alejandro Albericci, had come to the pagoda to make final adjustments on the formalwear of Jason's companions. He was also a fully capable dressmaker and had arranged the gowns for the female members of the group - some of whom were more open to the experience than others. Sophie glowered as Alejandro checked over Belinda's gown.

"Why would anyone wear this?" Sophie asked.

"Because maybe I'd just like to enjoy myself and feel pretty every once and a while?" Belinda said. "It wouldn't kill you to let yourself be a little feminine every now and again, Soph."

"It might kill me. Stuff tries to kill me a lot."

"Can't you relax for once in your damn life? Instead of complaining, how about you just tell me I look good?"

Sophie's expression was grumpy but apologetic. She looked up and down Belinda's salmon-coloured gown.

"You do look very nice, Lindy."

"It's kind of fun preparing to attend a ball instead of robbing it," Belinda said, drawing an odd look from Alejandro, who was crouched down, checking her seams. He stood up in front of Belinda, giving her a firm nod.

"Miss Callahan, you are perfect," he told her.

"See?" Belinda said, leaning to address Sophie around Alejandro. "People like you a lot more when you don't have to drag compliments out of them with a block and tackle."

"It was not a compliment," Alejandro said. "Just a simple statement of fact."

Belinda shoved a finger into his face.

"You can take your sexy hair and back off," she warned him. "I'm spoken for."

Alejandro held up his hands in surrender, giving her a charming smile.

"My loss," he said. "Now, for Miss Wexler."

Jason had added a formal dressing room to the pagoda for the occasion, so Alejandro was able to open the lengthy garment bag where he had left it hanging on the rack. Sophie braced herself as he slid the bag off her outfit, which remained hanging, and was surprised to see a formal pantsuit rather than a gown.

"Mr Geller made it quite clear," Alejandro said, "that anything you could not comfortably kill people in was unacceptable. As I pride myself on fulfilling the needs of my

clients in style, here we are. The magical augmentations are focused on defensive properties, with a more robust self-cleaning system than normal. This means that after any excitement, you can return to the party without having to explain away any awkward viscera stains.”

“See?” Belinda said. “Now, put on your damn clothes so we can go get our hair fixed.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?”

“Mr Williams,” Alejandro said. “Just between you and I, I appreciate your custom.”

“No worries, bloke,” Taika said as Alejandro telekinetically adjusted a seam. “I just like finding someone that works in my size. Getting good clothes can be a struggle back home.”

“That,” Alejandro said, “Is precisely the point I was looking to make. I’ve worked with a lot of leonids, but their fashion proclivities have given me pause on more than a few occasions. No offence intended, Mr Xandier.”

“No, I’m right there with you,” Gary said. The two largest members of Jason’s group were being fitted together.

“Your lot have clothing issues?” Taika asked. “Is it because of the fur?”

“Yeah,” Gary said. “Most leonids wear clothes that aren’t much more than a few straps, strategically placed for the bare requirements of modesty. I’ve even seen some isolated all-leonid communities where they don’t bother with clothes at all.”

“Nudist towns?” Taika asked. “Not sure I’d be up for that.”

“Nor should you be,” Alejandro said. “As a purveyor of fine apparel, I protest nudity in the strongest possible terms.”

“I like a nice, loose coverage,” Gary said. He had taken to the local fashion in greenstone, which was loose and colourful, with decorative tassels featuring heavily. His current outfit was very much a loose drape, almost in the combat-robe style that Jason favoured, but the colours and cut were neat and sober. The colours were light, as was the local fashion, with Taika in white and Gary mixing cream with grey to flattering effect.

The door to the men’s dressing room slid open and Jason came in.

“Hairdresser is calling for you,” he said.

“Bro, Shade is the hairdresser, and he’s got like thirty bodies.”

“He’s mostly after Gary,” Jason said.

“Why me?” Gary asked.

“Bro, you’re a lion man. You’ve got a mane.”

Amongst magically-propelled carriages, the class of grand carriage was more akin to a bus, ranging from smaller ones with seating for ten or twelve through to triple-decker tour bus sizes designed as mobile homes for entire groups of people. The one that arrived on the lawn in front of the pagoda was around the size of a school bus, with ornamentation that marked it as belonging to the royal family. Jason was already waiting when a gowned Liara emerged.

“Let’s go inside,” she told him. “Still too many ears out here.”

The atrium doors slid open to grant them passage and slid shut behind them.

“Are your people ready?” Liara asked.

“Just about. I get the feeling you want to talk about Zareen first, though.”

Liara glowered, but not at Jason.

“She’s a grown woman and I can’t make her choices for her,” Liara said. “In this case, though, you can.”

“Are you asking me to say no to Zareen as the royal family liaison?”

“Are you thinking about saying yes?”

“I haven’t decided to accept anyone, let alone considered who it would be. The Adventure Society representative I understand. They’re going out of their way with creating a fake adventurer identity for me, and want to keep an eye on how that goes. And me, of course. But what reason do I have to let the royal family insert themselves into my affairs? Again. I don’t know if you recall, but my involvement with the royal family was never something I went looking for.”

“I’d be perfectly happy if you didn’t take anyone. The family sees the way his ancestral majesty treats you and thinks that a relationship now will reap benefits in the future. When you’re gold, even diamond rank.”

“I’m uncertain on this,” Jason said. “Having Rimaros royalty could open some useful doors for us. But it could also draw unwanted attention, especially if it’s someone like Zara. But this decision isn’t just mine. It’s the whole team’s, and when I don’t have a real leaning on an issue like this, I’m inclined to defer to them. Maybe you should take the chance at this party to make your case to them individually.”

“I might just do that,” Liara said. “There are some things you will need to know before the ball begins.”

“This is the political part?”

“This is the political part,” Liara confirmed. “This ball is essentially a starting flag for the resumption of political manoeuvring. The surge is over and there’s plenty of power,

influence and money, all on the table. No one is exactly sure when the conflict with the messengers will start and we'll be back on a war footing, so the noble houses are eager to grab what they can, while they can."

"Oh great. You know how much I love being treated as a tool for someone else's ambitions."

"Then don't."

Jason looked at Liara with suspicion.

"What are you saying?" he asked.

"Your recent endeavour with those adventurers demonstrated that quite amply. You didn't put up with their games, or ours."

"What do you mean, yours?"

"I know that roping-in Jana to your little game was improvised."

"She did very well."

"But the way Miss Callahan impulsively yelling about... well, you know what about. It wasn't quite as smooth as you might have hoped, and even if it were, do you expect me to believe she did so on the spur of the moment?"

"Yes?" Jason said optimistically, earning him a wry frown from Liara.

"You wanted to show that while you might be willing to play the game," she said, "you'll always play it your way. And that's fine. Trying to stop you from being you is an exercise in futility. We would appreciate it if you brought the right version of you to the right situations, however."

"You're not just being general," Jason said. "You want me to do something at this ball."

"There are factions on factions," Liara said. "We've been very carefully looking into what various groups will be trying to do tonight. We're fairly confident that someone will challenge you to a duel."

"You're kidding. Over what?"

"They'll find a pretext. It will be someone young. Silver rank, like you. From one of the lesser houses that a greater house is using as a mask."

"What does anyone involved hope to get out of that?"

"The lesser house gets the favour of the greater one, and if their scion can make even a decent showing against you in a mirage chamber, it will bring him key prominence. As for the greater house, they're likely looking to see who will step up to support you, maybe even make hay of the situation to draw them out."

"Echo-sounding the political landscape."

“Echo-sounding?”

“Something people on Earth do to map out specific environments.”

“Earth. That’s the name of your world?”

“Of the other world. You don’t know a lot about my time there, do you?”

“Not much more than what you’ve told me. Any time you would like to tell me more, I would be open to that.”

“Another day, maybe. Today, I need to know what you expect me to do about this duel. Since you haven’t taken steps to put a stop to it, I assume you’re leaving it to me.”

“I’ve learned that expecting things from you is not a sensible approach, Asano. Just deal with it however you see fit.”

“Seriously?”

“Just remember what I said about the right version of yourself in the right situation. We’ve discussed fun Jason and the other Jason in the past. You keep referring to this ball as a party, but it’s not. We don’t want to see fun Jason. We want the other Jason.”

“You’re giving me open slather?”

“If I’m correctly guessing the meaning of that from context, then yes. Trying to tell you what to do never works out, Asano, be it because of you or some madness you’re caught up in. I’ve come to realise that the best approach is to accept that and work around it accordingly.”

“Huh,” Jason said, his expression nonplussed. “Now you say that I feel a bit like a difficult child.”

“Really?” Liara asked lightly. “That comparison never occurred to me.”

Jason and his team were far from alone in their trip to the ball. The grand carriage made a number of stops to pick up people on the way to the palace. Liara’s family was already inside when it arrived at the pagoda, which was clearly for the sake of appearances. It was far from practical, given their home’s proximity to the palace, to fly all the way to Arnote only to fly back.

At the pagoda, it took on Jason and his team, Rufus and his, plus Taika and Travis. In Livaros, they stopped at the temple of the Healer to pick up Arabelle and Carlos, and from the temple of Knowledge they picked up Gabrielle.

Jason had barely seen Gabrielle since his first arrival in Rimaros. There was contention between them, not to mention that she was Humphrey’s former lover. Jason was surprised to find that Sophie had no interest in the woman, but Travis did. Jason knew that Travis had been meeting extensively with the Church of Knowledge to determine what

he could and could not bring to this world from Earth's magitech, but only now discovered that Knowledge's representative had been Gabrielle.

Arabelle sat with Jason and her son, Rufus, so that they could have a quiet discussion during the trip.

"We need to have a discussion about Callum," Arabelle said. "He has become increasingly agitated about your prisoner, especially after finding out that you're leaving. To the point that I have finally managed to have him tell me the real reason he is so emphatic about getting to her."

"Oh?" Jason asked.

"Not here," Arabelle said. "I'll find you tomorrow."

Their carriage was one of many that entered the column of water rising up into the royal sky island. It docked at the side of the lake and their rather large contingent was led to the ballroom by palace stewards.

There was a lengthy process of their all being announced, during which time they stood around, looking over a ballroom the size of a sports oval. Over them, the roof was domed crystal, showing off the evening sky, with light coming from levitating chandeliers.

Jason, Travis and Taika stood together, looking out at a room where most of the people were high-ranking celestines. It was a sea of beautiful people with brightly coloured hair and sculpted, athletic bodies. The three of them shared a look.

"Does anyone else feel like..." Travis said.

"...we just walked into an anime," Jason finished.

"Bro, I feel like I'm going to do something not very sensible tonight."

The other two nodded their agreement.