

Chapter 606

That Boy In the Tent

Jason walked across the atrium of the pagoda and looked at the doors leading outside with a frown.

“Why do these swing open?” he mused out loud. The doors and the section of wall around them dissolved into cloud-stuff, revealing Zara Rimaros standing outside them.

“I’ll be with you in a sec,” Jason said. “I’m just doing some home renovation.”

The cloud-stuff re-solidified into sliding doors made of dark crystal, containing swirling blue and orange light. They slid open, revealing Zara again, but this time with a wry expression and raised eyebrows.

“Can’t do just one eyebrow?” Jason asked.

“You have a very political mind, don’t you, Mr Asano?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jason said innocently.

“Vesper used to do that, too. Provoke people socially because their reactions told her something about them, regardless of what the reactions were.”

“She never did that with me. I think she just kind of hated me.”

“She didn’t hate you, Mr Asano. She was irked by you. I think she saw more of herself in you than she would like. It didn’t help that you were a lot more brazen about it. She couldn’t be as brazen because she wasn’t as free. The Rimaros name has a lot of weight, and while that can be useful to throw around, we still have to carry it.”

“You can call me Jason. I told you that back in the tent where we met.”

“We’ve both come a long way since that tent.”

“I suppose we have.”

“You aren’t as... volatile as the last time we met. You felt dangerous, then.”

“That’s because the one I was most dangerous to was myself. I’m still dangerous to everyone else. More so than ever, in fact.”

“I remember your habit of enduring tribulation and coming out stronger for it. We met when you were on the way to see the gods, remember? They pushed you, and you suffered, but they knew that once you recovered, it would make you stronger. The next time I saw you, your aura was almost that of a different person. I realise now that what I saw was only the beginning.”

“They didn’t know I would recover. It was a test as much as a gift. If I’d crumbled, they’d have moved on without sparing me another thought.”

“Ours is not to question the gods.”

"Ours might not be, but mine is."

"You're casual with blasphemy."

"Yep. Are you going to come in, Princess, or are we going to keep talking where all the eyes and ears watching my house can eavesdrop?"

"Your home is a little intimidating."

"Only from the outside."

Zara nodded and moved through the doors that slid shut behind her. Compared to the blank space it had been to her senses from the outside, the interior was just the opposite as Jason's aura flooded the place with a strength that even Jason at full power could not project himself. Only the fact that it was not hostile to her at all stopped her from running for the door. The exterior of the building was a literal looming tower, while the inside was a metaphorical one.

Jason actively dialled back the amount the aura of the pagoda imposed on Zara. She wasn't a gold ranker that could shrug its influence off as easily as Liara or Carlos. Zara's lack of hostility meant that the aura of the place did not attack her, but neither was she one of Jason's friends, from whom the aura always withdrew to a benevolent background presence.

"You said it was only intimidating from the outside."

"I said it was only *a little* intimidating from the outside," Jason corrected.

Zara looked around at the open atrium, from the waterfall spilling off the mezzanine to the lush plants dividing the area into sections. The exterior wall was translucent from the inside, letting light spill in. There was a reception desk with the alien receptionist; a cloaked shadow figure with an eye made of loose energy for a face.

"What is this place?"

"It's a cloud house. Technically, it's a cloud palace, at this size. A fairly vertical one, but a palace. I couldn't have managed a tower this big at bronze-rank."

"Jason, I am a princess of one of the most prominent kingdoms in the world. I've seen cloud palaces, and that is not what this is."

"Yes, Princess, it is. It's just not all that it is."

She looked at Jason.

"Do you ever wish you could go back to being the person you were in that tent?"

The amusement dropped from Jason's expression.

"I spent a long time wishing that. Long enough that the desire to go back was turning into poison, only taking me further from who I was, then. You saw the result of that."

"I remember."

The last time Zara had seen Jason he had been a raw nerve. Angry, violent and distrustful, using his mysterious powers to lash out at the world.

“I had to learn to accept who I’ve become,” Jason said. “And who I’m becoming. That boy in the tent died because he wasn’t ready for the path ahead of him.”

“And what about the path ahead of you now?”

Jason took a long, contemplative look around at the atrium before answering.

“We’ll see.”

He set out through the atrium, along a pathway defined by plants potted directly into the floor. Jason’s adjustment of the doors was only the latest of the changes he had been making as he renovated the place to his liking. The atrium was much more garden-like than it had started out, with pathways leading to what was now an array of elevating platforms, as well as the fireman’s pole. One pathway led to the wall behind which the array of poles for his team was hidden.

Following Jason, Zara looked at the brassy pole with curiosity. It ran up to the ceiling where it passed through a hole sealed by a spiral aperture.

“What’s that for?”

Jason was walking in front of her and couldn’t follow her gaze, but he didn’t need to. He could sense where her attention was through her aura.

“Sliding down from the upper levels.”

“You have a problem with elevating platforms?”

“I might not be the boy I was when we met, Princess, but I haven’t entirely lost my sense of fun.”

“You can call me Zara.”

They moved onto an elevating platform that rose through the mezzanine level overhead. At each floor, the aperture that the platform passed through was sealed by mist that allowed passage from below while serving as a solid floor from above. This dynamically solid-gaseous cloud-stuff was something Zara had seen in other cloud constructs, not just Jason’s. It was the solid spiral doors sealing the holes for the fire pole that needed to open and close that came across as strange. Jason’s cloud palace possessed strange traits and seemed exceptional, so the less elegant choice for the pole had to be deliberate. Like the pole itself, it spoke to a whimsical choice that had more meaning to Jason than practicality.

Despite the oppressive aura pervading the space around her, seeing that kind of indulgence from Jason made Zara feel a lot more secure. His angry, violent intensity during their short expedition together had been disturbing. He had left the party behind, not

just annihilating Builder forces but somehow making them turn on one another. He had barely been less hostile to his fellow adventurers than the enemy.

The arrival of his team had mellowed him, but Zara had not been in contact since. Vesper's plans for re-aligning her in relation to the Irios family were overtaken by the war with the Builder and Vesper's death. It had made her nervous about the choice to see him, especially as he rejected her invitation to visit Vesper's memorial.

"I apologise for not joining you in paying respects to Vesper," Jason said. "There was a little too much attention on me for that, but I would like to do so before I go. I would be happy for you to join me, if you're open to some spontaneous scheduling."

She wondered how much he was picking up from her aura. There was clearly a profound connection between Jason and the pagoda, given that it was radiating his aura as if it were a temple to him.

They arrived at the top mezzanine level, which was a lounge area that continued the pagoda's theme of abundant plant life. Washed in light from the huge translucent walls, Jason sat on a couch and directed Zara to an armchair.

"I'm sure you didn't come here for a raincheck on a private memorial," he said. "What brings you to my door, Zara?"

Zara looked at Jason for a moment before speaking.

"The Adventure Society is assigning you a liaison," she said.

"If by assigning, you mean looking for someone we won't dump in the ocean inside of a week, then yes."

"There has been an idea floated," she said, "of another such position. Your group is growing and the royal family would like to have a representative in it. No authority, just someone who can be a genuine auxiliary, offering specific skills that could be useful to you."

Jason narrowed his eyes as he looked at Zara.

"What we—"

He held up a hand to cut her off.

"Allow me a moment to think," he told her.

"I know you can see through my emotions. This isn't a trick."

"I didn't think it was. But I'm also not reading your emotions. I could, you're right, but my aura manipulation isn't as sloppy as it used to be. I've had time to work on it while I've been convalescing."

"You can't stop yourself from reading the emotions of others when their auras overlap with yours. Not if they can't mask them properly."

A smile crept onto Jason's face.

"You're telling me what I can't do, Princess? That, historically, has not been something people have done accurately, and things don't tend to go well for them after. My aura strength means that I've been passively intruding on the privacy of the people around me for a while. That made things hard for someone close to me and made it harder to come together. It prevented us from having more time together than we ultimately did."

It wasn't hard to see there was an unhappy story there and Zara didn't enquire further.

"Removing the unmasked emotions of others goes beyond ordinary aura manipulation. You would effectively have to partition a section of your mind to assess the incoming information and decide whether to process it into your conscious mind or ignore it. That's deft mental self-manipulation and aura manipulation."

"There are aspects of our silver-rank attributes that I think go overlooked. The agility of the speed attribute is leveraged nowhere near as much as the strength of the power attribute. Even less so is what the mind can accomplish with a silver-rank spirit attribute. It's something I've been delving into as I explore combat trances, but it seemed to me that there were further applications. Every silver ranker can multitask quite well, but how many of us work on those aspects? Fortunately, I have a friend whose family trains adventurers. He was at least able to give some foundational training techniques."

"I'm vaguely familiar. Mind puzzles and observational tasks that require multiple threads of attention, yes?"

"Yes, but sometimes focus is important too, or we miss details. For example, I asked for a moment to think, which you appeared to completely miss as you launched into another conversation."

Zara smiled in awkward embarrassment.

"Sorry."

Jason stood up, walked to the edge of the mezzanine and leaned on the railing with his hands, looking out through the clear wall. Zara stayed where she was, not wanting to interrupt his thought again.

"Why are you here?" Jason asked without turning around.

"I wanted to talk about placing someone from the royal family in—"

"I know what your purpose is. Why are *you* here? Why not Liara? Your family has been wise in letting her be their face in this. She's someone I know and the lingering presence of Vesper engenders my sympathies. I suppose the same is true for you, but it's more complicated."

He turned around.

“Liara didn’t want to do this,” he realised. “She refused to be a part of it. Why?”

Zara opened her mouth but Jason forestalled her with a gesture.

“Not actually asking,” he said. “I’m just thinking at you. If Liara is against it, that means either your family is trying to do something stupid and she knows better, or she’s fine with doing it but doesn’t like something about the way it’s being done. Soramir would stop anything too idiotic, so...”

He grinned.

“Zareen,” he said. “There’s no way Liara would go with us, and who else would we put up with? They wouldn’t put her eldest in that position because she’s pure adventurer. She doesn’t have the political sensibilities for it or any interest in cultivating them. But the other daughter was more intrigued when they came to visit us. And she was close to Vesper, I recall. Playing on those sympathies again. The only other real option would be you, Zara, and that’s obviously never going to happen. There’s too many complica...”

He trailed off with an awkward wince.

“Oh,” he said moving back to sit opposite her, on the edge of his couch seat. He leaned forward to look her in the eye. “You did want it to be you.”

“I thought you weren’t reading my emotions.”

“I wasn’t. Now I am. I’m sorry, Princess, but you don’t get a ride on this bus. Why would you even want that? Aren’t you trying to be the next queen in whatever competition thing they do here?”

“That chance died the moment I tried my idiotic plan with Kasper Irios. Vesper was trying to salvage my reputation so that I might not be completely pushed aside, but now she’s gone and the relationship with the Irios family she was using as a pretext means her plan will never happen. I’ve already withdrawn from the contest and with it my title as Hurricane Princess.”

“Won’t that contest be going on for years? There’s time to make a comeback.”

“There are no comebacks. The monarch is the person who went beyond expectation without making mistakes.”

“Mistakes are how we grow.”

“And the people who made them will be fine advisors to the monarch who didn’t.”

“Ah.”

“In any case, that’s not my path anymore.”

“I’m sorry about that, Princess. But I’m not your new path. You made some choices that caused me trouble I very much did not need.”

"I thought mistakes were how we grow."

Jason opened his mouth to respond, only for nothing to come out. He closed his mouth, looking confused.

"That doesn't normally happen," he said. "I find myself forced to acknowledge the point."

Zara stood up.

"Zareen would be a strong addition to your group," she said. "She was already planning to move from adventuring to Adventure Society service, the way her mother did years ago. It seems she wants to pivot, however. This whole thing was her idea."

"And Liara knows my background better than most. She wants her daughter nowhere near me, and I can't say I don't empathise."

"I'm not going to try and sell you more than I already have," Zara said. "Whether you choose Zareen, myself, someone else or no one else, I'll leave it to you. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to try that pole."

Jason blinked his surprise, then grinned.

"I don't think your father would want that."

"My father is not as protective a parent as Liara."

"You say that, but most fathers try very hard to keep their daughters off the pole."

"Why? What's wrong with it?"

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.

Chapter 608

All Singer and No Song

The arena-like ballroom was set up in various zones, often repeated in different places around the room. Along with long buffet tables, stewards roamed with trays of food and drink. There were tables and small lounging areas, each with its own very high-end privacy screen. The privacy screens kept any sound from getting out, but did not prevent it from getting in, and there was no shortage of people using them to politic. Aura etiquette was very strict, with auras tamped down.

The Storm King and Soramir Rimaros were in one such area, but theirs was elevated, allowing everyone to see them and them to see everyone. They sat with other core members of the royal family, chatting quietly. It was clear from the body language that the presence of Soramir, the founder of the kingdom they ruled, was not helping his descendants to relax.

Liara had started telling Jason's group to not roam around in one giant pack only to have them not pay attention as they immediately split up on their own. Clive took off in the direction of a group wearing formal versions of scholarly robes. Gary, Farrah and Neil were touring the food tables while Sophie and Belinda wandered off together, looking suspiciously like they were casing the joint. Gary wasn't waiting on the palace staff and their tiny trays, having liberated a large serving tray from somewhere. He was at the tables, loading it up like a giant plate.

Humphrey and Rufus, the two socialites of Jason's friends, accompanied Liara's daughters to circulate. Liara's husband and son, Baseph and Joseph, moved in the direction of the Amouz family. Baseph came from that family before marrying into the royal house, and both men were high-ranking administrators in the family's business interests.

Rufus' mother Arabelle was playing guide to Carlos, who was not comfortable at fancy social events, while also riding herd on Travis and Taika. As for Jason, Liara was leading him to circulate, introducing him to a chain of prestigious citizens in rapid sequence. Most were nobles, but some, like the Remore family, held prestige and influence without holding titles.

"Jason Asano," Liara introduced, "I present Lady Ileana Irios. Lady Ileana, Jason Asano."

The ball had, thus far, been a rather tedious sequence of Liara introducing Jason to people and Jason not saying a lot as he did his best to look passive and mysterious. His

usual air of general amusement at the world was not in evidence in his face or voice, both of which were blank and cold as he met person after person.

“When we were having our little reputation problem with young Kasper,” Ileana said, “you suggested a meeting with our family,” Ileana said. “Perhaps we could have that meeting in the near future?”

While Jason was still embroiled in the aftermath of Zara using his name when she thought he was dead, he had run into Kasper Irios. The encounter had been engineered by Vesper for political reasons and Jason had made an overture to the Irios family that they had not taken up.

“I’m afraid my near future is occupied,” he apologised. “While I had the time before I became so prominent, you unfortunately never found the chance to seek me out. My window of availability has now closed, so I’ll have to accept it as a missed opportunity.”

Following Jason’s diplomatic rebuke, Liara quickly moved him on moving into the privacy screen of an empty standing table.

“If you could refrain from making personal jabs at an ally the royal family only just managed to reaffirm their ties with, that would be appreciated,” she told him.

“I know your family has been treating me as one since they found out I was in town, Princess, but I’m not an asset for the royal family to play around with as they like.”

“I know that this is all a show, Asano. You only need to play stern Jason with others.”

“You’ve been talking about ‘fun Jason’ and ‘stern Jason’ as if they were both personas and neither was real. What you need to understand, Princess, is that they both are. I don’t have multiple personalities; I just use certain parts of myself to keep a lid on others parts where maybe I shouldn’t be left to my urges. You should be very careful about asking for anything but fun Jason, Princess. He’s the lid.”

“Jason, the royal family is your ally.”

“Yes. But I don’t much care for allies, if I’m being honest. I consider you a friend, Liara, so I don’t count favours. But House Rimaros is an ally, and an alliance is just a measure of relative benefits. It’s a cold relationship and everything comes at a price. Yes, I’m here because showing that I’ll answer to the royal family, even if that is a lie, is of value to each party.”

“You don’t like being paraded around like livestock at an agricultural fair.”

“It doesn’t matter if I like it because I agreed to it. But if you want me to do tricks, you’ll need to feed me a treat.”

“What kind of treat?”

“That’s on you to figure out. I’m not looking to do tricks.”

The two noblewomen moved away with wary expressions on their faces.

“Bro, stop talking about sailor uniforms.”

“It just came out,” Travis sobbed. “I’m not good with women.”

“No kidding. You’re so bad with women that now I’m bad with women. This is a new experience for me: I’m a delicious chocolate drop.”

At that point, Arabelle found them again.

“You’re the size of a house,” Arabelle told Taika. “How do you keep sneaking off?”

“I’m like a jungle cat; lithe and stealthy.”

“I thought you were a delicious chocolate drop,” Travis said.

“I can be both. I’ve got depths.”

After their discussion, Liara left Jason to his own devices for the time being. He spotted Rick Geller and wandered over to speak with him. They found a couple of quiet seats with a privacy screen and sat down.

“You really are carrying yourself differently,” Rick said.

“How so?” Jason asked him.

“You’re not surrounded by beautiful women.”

“Rick, this is a party where the serving staff are cored-up silver rankers. Everyone around us is beautiful.”

“Yes, but you don’t have a personal barricade of them,” Rick said. “Or your sparkly cloak, for that matter. I thought you would be using it to accessorise.”

“That was your idea,” Jason said. “It would be a little lacking in decorum, and Alejandro would be disappointed if I covered up his excellent formalwear.”

“There’s no shortage of people using their more flamboyant powers to add a little flash,” Rick said. “Something I recall you not being above.”

“Back in Greenstone, maybe. Not here.”

“Didn’t you paint the sky with your personal crest and blast your aura across the city? As I recall, you did that here and in Greenstone.”

Jason expression took on a warning that Rick did not miss.

“In Greenstone, Richard, I was being tested to make sure I wasn’t a slave of the Builder after being kidnapped and implanted with a star seed. And here, I was unconscious when that happened and my friends were desperately trying to save my life. I hope you haven’t been telling people that was some kind of display designed to grab attention.”

Rick shook his head. Jason's aura remained sealed away behind a polite facade, yet Rick still felt pressured by the sudden intensity coming off Jason. Jason saw the effect he was having and relaxed his body language.

“Rick, people who have power don't need to flaunt it. Look around at the people in here showing off. They're young, trying to stand out. Back in Greenstone, I was just like that; all singer and no song. Desperate. Always making a spectacle of myself; blustering my way through like a pufferfish. That worked in Greenstone because it's a whole town full of empty bluster. But now we're on the opposite end of the world, literally and figuratively. This room contains some of the most powerful people on the planet, and they know that the more you have, the less you need to show.”

“No big stunt from you tonight, then?”

“I didn't say that. We'll see where the evening takes us.”

“Zareen,” Jason said. He had been sitting alone with a plate of food, periodically rebuffing social overtures when Liara's daughter approached him and he waved her to a seat.

“Mr Asano, it almost feels like my mother has been shepherding me away from you since we arrived.”

“Your mother has other issues on her mind, I'm sure. And call me Jason.”

“No, she doesn't. Not at the top of her mind, anyway. She hates this aspect of being royalty, but she inherited House Rimaros' interest in you from Vesper. There was a sense that there aren't too many people you would tolerate, and that you wouldn't be unsubtle about making that clear.”

“Which neatly brings us to the topic you really want to talk about,” Jason said.

“I can be an asset to your team. I'm not as prominent as Zara, but I can offer almost as many benefits. More, without the parts of her reputation that aren't the best.”

“I don't doubt it,” Jason said. “But I don't like how you manoeuvred me, Princess.”

“I didn't manoeuvre you.”

“No? You positioned me as the person who has to say no to either you or your mother. That way, the ultimate decision was mine and not a conflict between the two of you. Whichever one of you ends up disappointed, something external is the crux of it, making reconciliation between you easier.”

“You can benefit from thinking like that.”

“I've tried playing politics before,” Jason said. “I have a good eye for spotting political issues in time to react, but every time I try to actively participate, it goes wrong.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

“It goes wrong and people get hurt,” Jason reiterated. “People who don’t deserve it. Politics has a way of doing that. For example, I’m now caught up in the family politics between you and your mother. I don’t like being in that position, Zareen. You made a bold move instead of talking to your mother about it because you knew she would be against it. That’s something I would have done, once upon a time. I wouldn’t anymore.”

“You’re not going to take me.”

“Do what you should have done in the first place: convince your mother. Excise me from your family politics and we can have the discussion again.”

“Will you take Zara instead?”

“I don’t know. Right now, I’m short on compelling reasons to take her, you, or anyone else the royal family may or may not have suggested.”

“The family proposed other names? Who?”

“I never said they proposed any names. Go talk to your mother, Zareen, because you and I are done discussing this.”

Zareen frowned but knew when to cut bait, getting up and leaving the privacy screen.

“The royal family hasn’t suggested any alternative names,” Shade pointed out from Jason’s shadow.

“I never said they did.”

“But Miss Zareen is clearly convinced otherwise because of what you said.”

“Is she?” Jason asked innocently.

“You can be quite mean sometimes, Mr Asano.”

“You’re those thief girls trailing around after Asano, aren’t you?”

Sophie and Belinda turned to face the brash young nobleman, flanked by three of his fellows. Their auras were clean of cores and Sophie could tell from the way they were standing that they were trained to fight, and trained well. She looked the boy up and down before turning away again without bothering to respond.

“Hey, I was talking to you.”

“Do you think someone put him up to this to provoke us?” Belinda asked Sophie. “I can’t imagine them letting anyone in here dumb enough to make the kind of scene they seem to be heading for on purpose.”

“Look at you, all sophisticated,” the boy said. “Not bad for someone who crawled up out of the gutter.”

"I know," Belinda said. "We started with nothing, and here I am at the same place, at the same rank as you, without all the money, time and effort they spent on you. Does that mean that we're amazing, or that you're just kind of a waste?"

"Don't bother," Sophie told her. "Boy, if you want to make trouble, you don't need a pretence. I'll be happy to punch your teeth through the back of your head."

"Let's go, Soph. You know Jason is the one who was going to be provoked into a duel. These idiots have obviously been sent to make trouble, so don't play along."

"Why is Jason the only one who gets to beat the blood out of someone?" Sophie complained. "I have healing potions to put the blood back in, after."

"Is that a challenge?" The boy asked.

"Y—"

"No," Belinda firmly spoke over Sophie. "It's a social event and we have no interest in socialising with you. Leave us alone."

Belinda directed Sophie away and the boys followed until the women met up with Liara coming the other way and veered off.

"Thank you," Liara said after the three women moved into a privacy screen.

"It was obvious that they were the end of someone else's stick when they made that approach outside of one of the screens," Belinda said. "They wanted an audience."

"It seems that whoever is looking to provoke Asano has realised that the best way to do it is to start with his companions," Liara observed. "You aren't the only ones being approached by less-than-polite individuals, but you all seem to be handling it well. I saw some young fool looking like he was going to cry while slinking away from Arabelle Remore."

"I'm not sure that's going to hold for everyone," Belinda said. "We might want to go find—"

A gong-like sound rang out and all eyes in the room looked to Gary, holding a dented serving platter as he stood over a man on the floor.

"And I only waited that long so I could finish the food on it," Gary said loudly. "You're worth hitting over the head with a lump of metal, but you aren't worth wasting good crab puffs. Bad crab puffs, maybe, but the catering here is excellent."

"I guess it's starting, then," Liara said.

Chapter 609

Hefty Nuggets

Unsurprisingly, the commotion in the middle of the palace ballroom drew attention from across the room. After glancing at Gary standing over some nobleman he had dropped with a serving platter, Jason's attention moved to everyone else. He watched body language and looked for aura spikes, as much as he could without pushing out his senses more forcefully. Most of the obvious reads came from younger members of the nobility, as the more experienced and high-ranking ball attendees had well-trained self-control.

Seeing Rufus making a beeline for Gary, Jason instead moved to join Princess Liara and her daughter Zareen inside a privacy screen. He asked about several people he had picked out as potentially being involved from the way they watched the scene. Some they ruled out immediately as having prompted things from behind the scenes, as there was no political gain for them. Others they gave him quick introductions of, no more than name, house and known political factions.

Jason noticed that Gary and the man he hit were standing back, while Rufus and another man were talking.

"Why aren't the people involved the ones talking?"

"The etiquette, in matters of personal offence, is to have others stand for you in the discussion," Liara explained. "The idea is to maintain cool heads and allow diplomacy to rule passion."

"Does that work?"

"Not really. The real reason is to use such provocation as a political tool, as is being done here. The person standing for the 'aggrieved' pushes for a duel and stands for the person in that, too."

"We have something similar in my world," Jason said. "Or we used to, anyway. When we still had duels. There was a second who stood in if one of the participants didn't have the bottle to front up."

"Does that mean when they got scared and didn't show for the duel?" Zareen asked.

"It does," Jason said. "So, who is that standing for the guy Gary clocked?" Jason asked.

"I'm not sure," Liara said. "He's wearing the symbol for House de Varco."

"It's Lancet de Varco," Zareen said. "He's a tournament duellist; well known if you follow the mirage arenas, but they haven't been operating for months. He's also a

sometime adventurer. His guild uses him for public recognition, and in return, they help rank him up with controlled monster encounters, the way aristocratic families do with their scions. He's one of the rare arena fighters to not use cores."

"Do you know where he was when the Builder cities attacked?" Jason asked.

"Most of his guild fought the city attacking Livaros," Zareen said. "All their 'special' members were assigned to monster watch on Provo."

"That's not so bad," Jason said. "I did that too."

"Yes, but while you were taking on gold-rank monsters by yourself, he was securing the inside of a bordello."

"I was just one monster," Jason corrected. "I'm not a madman."

Zareen and her mother shared a glance.

One of the people standing by was a gold-ranker, Quint de Varco, in the same dark maroon house colours as Lancet. He was amongst the people Jason asked Liara and Zareen about. He stood out for having the same house colours as the man talking with Rufus, along with body language that Jason read as more anticipatory eagerness than the curiosity displayed by most of the onlookers.

"I think I'd better get in there," Jason said.

He didn't use his usual trick of aura manipulation to smoothly move past people as this was not a crowd it would work on. As such, it took him time and a little rudeness to move past the gathering onlookers. He arrived to find that the situation had been escalating.

Gary was still holding a serving tray with an almost cartoonish dent. The head responsible for that dent belonged to a sullen young nobleman, now back on his feet. Separating the two as they stood off against one another were Rufus and Lancet de Varco, whose dark maroon outfit had the symbols of his house and his guild stitched in gold. It was very flattering, matching the gold of the celestine's hair and eyes.

The adventurer facing Rufus was speaking.

"From the look of your friend, Mr Remore, I would be quite confident in presuming that no apology will be forthcoming."

"Let me guess," Rufus said. "You aren't willing to let this go unresolved."

"Your friend has humiliated mine. If no restitution is offered, then I am afraid it must be taken."

"A duel," Rufus said, blank-faced. "I assume you intend to stand for your friend."

"I am. Will you be standing for yours?"

"No," Jason said, stepping out from amongst the onlookers. "He won't."

Lancet turned to Jason.

"The storied Jason Asano."

"Yep. Don't know who you are, sorry."

"Then allow me to introduce myself. I am Lancet de Va—"

"I don't care," Jason said. "Someone put you on the end of a stick and poked you in the direction of my friend. I'm going to be honest, Lancet: I know there's been a lot of talk about me, and I'm only here so the fine upper crust of Rimaros can finally get a look at me. Get a sense of who I am. Which I suspect you're about to firsthand. I don't know if someone put you here to give me that chance or because they have some agenda, but it was the right move. When you go after me through my friends, you get to see exactly who I am."

Lancet laughed.

"You barged over here because you somehow thought this was about you?"

"I did."

"You're quite arrogant, aren't you?"

"It's kind of my thing. So, as much as I would like to watch you find out what happens when you challenge Rufus Remore, you're getting me."

"So be it," Lancet said. "We can make arrangements after the ball is finished."

"No need," Jason said. "It's a nice big room."

Lancet frowned in confusion.

"Big room?"

"For the duel," Jason said. "We'll knock it out quick and let these fine people go back to their celebration."

"Are you talking about fighting right here? We'll duel in a mirage chamber, you savage."

It was Jason's turn to laugh.

"Oh, no. You asked for a duel, not a dance. I hate to break it to you, bloke, but whoever put you up to this made you the pointy end of the stick. That's the end that gets blood on it. A duel is about putting yourself on the line for your principles."

"Putting your reputation on the line."

"And you think pretending to fight is where your reputation will come from?"

"I am an experienced arena duellist, you thug. I can assure you that it is very far from pretend and there is plenty of reputation to be had."

Jason grinned as he saw the gold ranker from House de Varco wince. While there was no doubt that many knew Lancet's background, that was very different to making a point of it himself.

"An 'experienced arena duellist' wound up here, challenging someone to a duel in a mirage arena?" Jason pointed out, voice filled with scepticism. "It's almost like someone planned it."

Lancet blanched as he realised he'd broken the cardinal rule of the political setup by making the setup transparent. Everyone would continue to play along, but it was a minor humiliation for House de Varco. Jason wasn't going to leave the knife just sitting there and gave it a twist.

"Mirage chambers are for training. Arena duelling is a sport. I'm sure it requires a great deal of skill, but this social event is celebrating the people who put themselves on the line in the jungles and fortress towns. Who went into the depths to fight underwater monsters and stood their ground against Builder cultists and Purity loyalists. Reputation comes from what you do; not what you pretend to do in a magic playhouse. How do you fight for your principles when the fight isn't real? If you want a duel, you put blood on the line. If you don't have the courage of your convictions, you're just a coward playing pretend. So, what will it be, Lancet? Courage or cowardice?"

"Your words are just sounds of a beast, howling for blood because it's all his brutish mind understands."

"Cowardice it is."

"Refusing to participate in a backwards blood ritual does not make me a coward!"

"No," Rufus said, stepping up next to Jason. "Calling for a fight and then backing out when you actually have to risk something is what makes you a coward."

"You expect me to have a real fight with an affliction specialist?"

"What does his speciality matter?" Rufus asked. "I thought this was a matter of principle. Oh, are you worried that an affliction specialist can't face you without a team to support him? That's considerate, but unnecessary. He's an affliction skirmisher, not a traditional specialist. He'll hold his own against you, don't worry."

"I apologise," Jason said. "I mistook your concern for my wellbeing for cowardice. Now that it's settled, we can commence the duel. It looks like the dance floor has been cleared, is that space enough for you?"

Lancet's smug expression was now pure bile.

"Rimaros is the heart of civilisation, not some frontier town. We settle our affairs like gentlemen, not drunkards brawling in an alley."

“You’re the one who picked this fight,” Rufus said. “You can refuse to fight it and crawl off if you like, letting all these people know exactly what you are. That’s the benefit of being in the heart of civilisation. The people in that alley you talked about? They don’t get that choice. They win or die; they aren’t free to be cowards.”

“Stop calling me a coward!” Lancel snapped.

“Or what?” Jason asked. “You’ll challenge me to a duel in a nice, safe mirage chamber?”

Jason could sense Lancel’s feeling of being cornered as the young nobleman channelled his fear into anger. Jason knew that if he could sense it, so could many others in the room, which itself sealed Lancel’s fate. The entire encounter was about putting on a show, and they had seen what Lancel was. As the one who had lost control of his aura, letting his emotions spell out, Lancel knew it as well.

“I guess you were right,” Jason told him. “You do put reputation on the line. Your mistake was pretending to be something you’re not. If you aren’t willing to go all the way, you’ll always come up short against someone who is.”

“You’re just a brute,” Lancel shot back. “Everyone in here knows it.”

“I don’t deny it,” Jason said. “Which leaves you the choice between fighting the brute or running from him.”

“Refusing to spill blood in the middle of a royal ball isn’t running.”

“Fair enough. I’m sure we can fight a training hall somewhere. Probably best.”

“We don’t have to find a training hall, you lunatic. That’s what mirage chambers are for!”

“Mirage chambers are so you can do things without facing the consequences,” Rufus said. “Duels are all about consequences, which means that, by definition, you cannot hold a duel in one. All you can do is spar.”

“So, what’s it going to be?” Jason asked. “We have all these people watching.”

“Perhaps,” a new voice interjected, “everyone can take a step back.”

The crowd parted like the Red Sea to permit passage of the Storm King.

“Young master de Vasco,” the king said, “is here representing a powerful house and a powerful guild. I wonder if, in the spirit of celebration and reconciliation, Young Master de Vasco would be willing to withdraw his duel request. And that you, Mr Asano, Mr Remore and Mr Xandier, would be willing to accept that without blame or recrimination. No victors, no cowards and *no grudges*.”

“I would,” Lancel said, grabbing the lifeline.

The king looked to Jason and his companions.

“Will you accept the withdrawal of the challenge without prejudice?” he asked them.

“We would be willing to do so,” Jason said, giving a short bow. “As a favour to you, Your Majesty.”

They all felt the wave of whispers move through the onlookers; the favour of a monarch was no small thing, and the king would not be the one in debt. That would be Lancet and the forces standing behind him – whom the king had chosen to mention specifically.

“Then I will count it as a favour, Mr Asano. And as someone who has seen recordings of what you do to people, I'd appreciate your refraining from further attempts to do it in my ballroom. We pay our stewards well, but some things I would still feel bad about making them clean up.”

“I'll do my best, Your Majesty. But some days people won't let you end it with clean hands.”

The king let out a chuckle, like the parent of a naughty child.

“I think it's safe to say, Mr Asano, that after this display, anyone who comes to you looking for trouble will get exactly what they asked for.”

The Storm King turned to leave, but paused as his gaze fell on Travis.

“Travis Noble,” he said. “House Rimaros would like to again extend our thanks for designing the weapon that brought down the Builder's flying city and saved Rimaros, perhaps the entire Storm Kingdom.”

“Er, your welcome.”

“Our door will always be open to you, young man. House Rimaros remembers the debts it owes as well as the debts it is owed.”

Once the king walked back towards the royal family's seating platform, Lancet moved off in the direction of his house members.

“It just feels awkward standing here after that,” Jason said.

“We could go get food,” Gary suggested.

Jason and his team received a wide berth after the incident. While he made a very distinct impression in Rimaros society, that wasn't the same as a good one. He was sat at a table with Liara and Zareen, sharing a large plate of food that Gary had left behind to go get a larger plate of food.

“That could have gone worse,” Jason said. “It could have gone better, but on balance, I'd say I was happy. I'll call it a solid win.”

“You would?” Liara asked. “Everyone thinks you're dangerously volatile, now.”

“Which matches with what they've been assuming, based on all the rumours floating around about me. I was never trying to ingratiate myself with the nobility. I was trying to cement myself as an unpredictable factor with the favour of the royal house. Between the king and people seeing us here, sharing snacks, that's coming along nicely. No one wants to interfere with me until they know more, but I've also demonstrated that I can be reined in. I've established myself as a factor best avoided, but that can be managed.”

“Did you plan for the king to step in?” Zareen asked.

“That wasn't part of any plan I was told about,” Liara said.

“I didn't plan it,” Jason said. “It was one of several scenarios I gamed out, however. Royal intervention, the people behind Lancet popping out. I was surprised they didn't send someone more capable. I saw he was an empty shirt and ran with it.”

“He's far from an empty shirt,” Zareen said. “Being a successful arena fighter in Rimaros means that his skills are real.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, “But his spine's imaginary. He never had to scramble for his life with nothing but his own skills and tenacity marking the line between life and death. He smelled so green it's like someone just mowed the lawn.”

Liara thought back to the time she watched Jason fighting against the trio of Purity loyalists. They had been sent after him with powers and items specifically to counter him. Even so, he struggled far longer than she would have expected before they finally pinned him down, and even then he never gave up, dragging her into it. It was as desperate a fight as she'd seen, but he treated it almost like any other day.

“I don't think they anticipated you asking for a blood duel during a royal ball when they chose him. What would you have done if he'd accepted the duel on your terms?”

“Drank the life out of him until someone made me stop.”

They turned to look at a man marching in their direction. He was wearing the same outfit as Lancet de Varco, but Jason could immediately spot that this was a different kind of man. He hadn't honed his abilities in the safety of a mirage chamber. He came right up to the table, planting his feet firmly as he stood in front of them. He started with a bow to Liara.

“Your highness.”

“Strictly speaking, the correct form of address is ‘milady,’” Liara told him.

“Apologies, milady,” he said, then turned to Jason. “My name is Hector de Varco, and I challenge you to a duel. Right here is fine.”

“Huh,” Jason said. “You realise the king just stopped me from doing this, right? Bloke, you might want some looser pants if you're going to haul around hefty nuggets like those.”

Chapter 610

Following Your Convictions to Your Death

Jason, Liara and Zareen were sitting at a table, with Hector de Varco standing in front of them. It was already drawing attention, even if people couldn't hear through the invisible privacy screen. Hector was a larger man than his relative, Lancet, and less polished. His hair was trimmed short instead of a sculpted coiffure, with broad shoulders and an outfit that, while tailored, lacked the same flatteringly painstaking fit. Hector also lacked the gold hair of Lancet, instead sporting a deep, shining copper in his eyes and hair.

Jason and the princesses shared a look.

"Young Master de Varco," Liara said. "The king personally and specifically asked Mr Asano to refrain from duelling in his ballroom."

"Then we can take it elsewhere, milady. I am happy to let Mr Asano choose the venue."

"That is only the beginnings of our concerns," Liara told him.

"Indeed," Jason agreed. "I was just telling the princesses here that I was quite satisfied with how things turned out. I'm not going to accept a duel just because you aren't happy with your family come out looking when they came looking for me."

"You did nothing, Mr Asano," Hector said. "Lancet is the one who hurt the reputation of our house. I wish to you show you, and all the people who saw his shameful display, that the de Varco family knows how to stand, be it in victory or defeat."

Jason narrowed his eyes.

"You don't expect to win," he said.

"I am confident in my abilities," Hector said. "But I do not fear defeat. A failure you survive is but a stepping stone to the next success."

"Your motivations are irrelevant," Liara said. "There's no way—"

"I have conditions," Jason said.

"No, you do not," Liara told him.

"Princess," Jason said, "while I ever value your counsel, the challenge was made to me. The decision is mine."

There was a delicate reverberation of his aura in Jason's authoritative tone, giving it a weight that even the gold-rank princess could not ignore.

"Firstly," Jason said to Hector, "it has to be tonight. I don't have time to be running around after every noble house that wants to put me in a fight. I have gods and great astral beings lining up for that already. Second, you need the king to approve. I've already

caused one commotion and I have no intention of forcing him to take things in hand a second time. I'm aware that adventurers of non-elite backgrounds are given leeway in etiquette, but I'm not that bereft of courtesy. Thirdly, I'm going to need some incentive. What you're proposing is a one-sided game. So long as you take your lumps without wetting yourself, you get the good showing for your house that you're looking for, win or lose. I, on the other hand, get nothing, win or lose. I don't need to prove myself to the people here. The only reason I showed up is to demonstrate that I'm not some lunatic who's going to start an interdimensional invasion again."

"Again?" Zareen asked.

"Pretend you didn't hear that," Jason told, then turned back to Hector.

"In short, mate, what's in it for me? And don't say pride or honour, because I have no interest in either."

Hector frowned in thought for a moment before his eyes snapped up to meet Jason's.

"Mr Asano, how familiar are you with House de Varco?"

"If I was counting the minutes since I heard about you, I'd run out of fingers and toes, but not by much. Princess Liara said you were traders."

"At the risk of contradicting the princess, Mr Asano, while we do an amount of trade, it's a corollary to our primary endeavour, which is the construction of vehicles. Everything from wagons to ships to airships; even exotic flying vessels for private buyers."

"I'm already good for transport, mate."

"Yes," Hector said. "You possess a cloud flask. But as I said, my family creates all manner of transport."

"You're offering me another cloud flask?"

"No. While the creation of such a vehicle is an ambition my family is working towards, we are not there yet. We have managed some more limited cloud constructs, a true cloud flask remains in the realm of ambition. But our progress has produced a by-product that you may find appealing."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"A cloud flask can take a vehicle form," Hector said. "But those forms are basic. That's fine for a static construct, like a cloud house, but vehicles are more dynamic. The inherent property of a cloud flask is to take on materials to expand its capabilities. In their studies of cloud flasks, my family had developed the means to harness that effect. With the right materials and design matrix, a cloud flask can replicate the finest vessels that my family produces. And they, Mr Asano, are some of the finest vessels in the world."

Jason looked to Liara, who gave him a confirming nod. He then turned back to Hector and leaned forward in his chair.

"I'll admit that sounds interesting."

"I know for a fact that we have several such design matrices sitting around as the results of our ongoing experiments into cloud constructs. If you agree to this duel, I will offer you the design and materials for a land vessel. If you win, I will offer you the same for an air vessel."

"How much material are we talking about here?" Jason asked.

"I'm talking about the raw materials to build an entire airship from scratch, Mr Asano. A small one. My understanding is that you won't be able to produce the kind of massive skyships cloud flasks are known for producing until gold rank."

Jason remembered his first look at Emir's cloud ship, the size of a massive ocean liner.

"That is acceptable," he said, "but I have one more condition: It can't just be you. You have to bring three companions."

"You want to fight four of us alone?"

"No, I'll be bringing companions of my own. If I take a second opportunity to kick the crap out of someone and don't invite my friend Sophie, she'll kick the crap out of me."

"Miss Hurin," Trenchant Moore said. Farrah looked at the tall, lean, pale man with dark hair, angular features and bright blue eyes. A little too blue, in fact. She guessed that, like Jason, his eyes had diverged from their original state.

"Mr Moore," Farrah said. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I have heard that you will be staying with us in Rimaros after your friend and his team have all left."

"For a time."

"I am... that is good."

"Wow," Farrah said. "You're really smooth with the ladies. Come on, Stretch. I don't think Jason is going to kill anyone on the dance floor, so we're probably fine taking a spin."

She grabbed his hand and dragged him in that direction as he trailed behind.

"Stretch?"

Jason and Hector approached the platform atop which was a lounge area for the core members of the royal family. There wasn't a lot of lounging taking place, however, with the presence of Soramir plainly reducing the family's ability to relax. Hector was even more

nervous as they approached, only four people looking unperturbed. Two were diamond rankers; Soramir and Zila Rimaros. One was Jason, who would not have looked out of place strolling a market with his easygoing stride. The Storm King was neither relaxed nor intimidated, playing up the stern-but-benevolent monarch rather than taking it easy with family.

There were no guards at the platform. Anyone who made trouble there would either be a peer of Dawn's or swiftly scraped off the polished floor by palace stewards. Even the most casual observer noticed that no one approached the platform without a very distinct purpose. Jason reflected on the contrast between that and the people approaching him earlier at the event, before he started talking about blood duels in the middle of a society ball.

Jason didn't hesitate as he entered the platform's privacy screen, which started at the short steps leading to the platform. Hector had been rather bold earlier, but the pinnacle members of the royal family intimidated him in a way that even the gold-rank Princess Liara did not.

"Come on, bloke," Jason encouraged as he made his way up the steps, turning his attention to Soramir and the Storm King, whose name he still didn't know. He just knew that he was Zara's father.

"G'day again, your kingness," Jason said, then nodded to Soramir. "G'day Soramir; it's been a minute."

Hector, who had already dropped to one knee, had the look of a man trying to figure out how to shuffle very quickly on one knee away from the madman next to him.

"I had rather expected," the Storm King said, "that our last conversation would be the end of you making commotions at this event, Mr Asano."

"Then you might want to skip my invite next time," Jason said. "The more I try to have a nice, quiet time, the more it ends up being one thing after another. I tried to have a simple barbecue to meet the neighbours when I moved into town, and these two showed up. Uninvited, no less."

Jason gestured at Zila and Soramir with a pointed finger. Jason hadn't seen Soramir in some time, since he was hurt escaping the underwater complex. It was plain that many members of royalty looking on were not happy about Jason's insouciance, but they were not going to speak up when the king and the diamond rankers were willing to tolerate it, even if they failed to understand why.

"Would it hurt you to show a little deference, Jason?" Soramir asked lightly.

"Would it hurt you to offer a bloke a seat?" Jason asked. "Addressing the deference issue would involve delving into my thoughts of the relative merits of different forms of governance. I don't think this is the time and place for that particular debate."

"While I genuinely say I would find that fascinating," the Storm King said, "You're right that this is not the place. Which begs the question of why you have approached me, along with this much more respectful young man from House de Varco. Given our last conversation, you make for an unexpected pairing."

Jason prodded the still kneeling Hector with his foot.

"This is your show, bloke. Maybe stand up and tell the nice king what you want for Christmas?"

Hector was a silver ranker and didn't sweat, but he felt like his body might figure out how from pure nervousness. As Jason conversed with the royals, Hector realised that his assumptions about the man he had challenged were way off. Not only was he speaking with his Majesty and his Ancestral Majesty in a way that Hector would only describe as suicidal, but *he was getting away with it*.

How was Asano not wilting under the attention of all that power? Just the passive aura interactions from having two diamond rankers pay passing attention to him were making the hair on his arms stand on end, and they were restraining themselves. Anxiously, under the now focused attention of the King and royal family, Hector got to his feet. He steeled himself, planting his feet as he raised his eyes to look at the king.

"Your Majesty, after my house failed to comport itself in a manner that reflects well on its place in your kingdom, I took it upon myself to rectify the circumstances."

"And how did you seek to go about that task?"

"I challenged Jason Asano to a duel, your highness. However, Mr Asano refused, citing his respect for you and your desire that this gathering remains a peaceful one. He said he would not accept unless my challenge could be made with your approval."

"And why would I give that approval? You want to have a bloody fight in the middle of my ballroom, in the middle of my ball?"

"Perhaps you could suggest an alternate venue, Your Majesty," Jason suggested. "Somewhere roomy, since it's actually going to be four duels. Should you approve?"

"Four duels?" the king asked.

"I thought that if we're going to do it, why not put on a show? So, if you have a big room somewhere that maybe you don't mind us breaking some bits off of, we could just quietly bunk off and leave your guests to their lovely evening."

"And who else would be participating in this series of duels?" Soramir asked.

“The guy who’s better at me with swords, the woman who’s better than me with fists and the guy who’s better than me at talking to people like you.”

“That would be Rufus Remore and Sophie Wexler,” Soramir said. “Not to put too fine a point on it, Mr Asano, but that last description does little to narrow it down.”

Jason let out an easy laugh and pointed. There was no shortage of people watching, despite not hearing anything, having seen Jason and Hector approach the king.

“It’s the tall, broad-shouldered bloke that is suddenly very aghast that I’m pointing him out to you.”

“Perhaps,” Soramir said to the king, “we can make some entertainment of it. The old duelling arena has seating for an audience.”

“Wait, you guys have a duelling arena?” Jason asked. “You should have brought that up when the other guy was crying about mirage chambers and saved us some trouble.”

“It has gone unused for many years,” the king said.

“It was installed only a century or so after the kingdom was founded,” Soramir explained. “Back when I still ruled the Storm Kingdom, mirage chambers were yet to be invented.”

“Duelling was already on the decline by the time they were,” the king continued, “but the safety they offered resulted in something of a resurgence.”

“I happen to agree with Mr Asano that there are no duels in mirage chambers,” Soramir said. “They’re just performances for people pretending to have courage.”

“Performances that let the hot-headed young members of the Houses play their little games without starting blood feuds,” the king countered. “Not everything has to be about following your convictions to your death.”

“As Mr Asano has done exactly that several times,” Soramir said, “I don’t think you will have any more luck of having him agree than you would me. So you might as well reopen the arena and let the ball attendees enjoy some sport.”

“Explain to me,” the king said, “how failing to convince you and Mr Asano of anything means I have to allow duels to take place.”

Jason opened his mouth to respond and then stopped, frowning.

“What the…”

“Is there a problem, Mr Asano?” Soramir asked.

“I figured someone would try and break into my house while everyone was off at a party, but it just had to be while I was talking to the king, didn’t it. Sorry, Your Maj; I better take a look at this.”

“Your Maj?” Hector asked, dumbfounded as Jason dug a hand into his shirt and pulled out a necklace. It had two amulets on it, one being his Amulet of the Dark Guardian, and the other being his shrunken cloud flask. Cloud stuff came spilling out of the tiny flask and formed a vertical ring the size of a portal. It wasn’t portal energy that shimmered into being, however, but an image of Jason’s pagoda. Four people dressed in black were on one of the lower floor balconies, where they had laid down a board and were drawing a ritual on it.

“Mr Asano?” the king asked.

“Yes?” Jason absently answered as he watched the image.

“How are you maintaining any connection to your cloud building through the very significant defences around this sky island?”

Jason went still, then turned his head to look at the king with a friendly smile.

“Uh... I’m not.”

“Then what exactly is this?” the king asked, gesturing at the floating ring.

“Art?”