

## Chapter 596

### What She Was Willing to Do

"Now that Dawn has scarpered," Jason said, "I'm half of a mind to do the same. Bottle up the pagoda, portal out and bunk off. No one would notice, right?"

Jason and his friends were sitting around a long table eating lunch.

"Of course, someone would notice," Rufus said. "There are twelve people observing the building right now."

"Seventeen," Jason and Estella corrected simultaneously before glancing at each other briefly.

"The point is," Rufus said, "that if you start making unexpected moves, people will start getting worried."

"He always makes unexpected moves," Farrah said. "And they do always get worried."

"I'm not that bad."

"Bro, you went through a children's ward and made everyone think you're an angel."

"That was one time."

"You had a car chase gunfight with a motorcycle gang hopped up on vampire blood," Taika said. "On TV. And I was driving. I'm not good at dodging bullets, bro. I'm too big."

"We do have some responsibilities here before we can leave," Humphrey pointed out. "I don't feel bad about skipping this meeting with Estella's former employer, but we've agreed to help Miss Leal obtain a new familiar."

As someone with a bonded familiar of his own, Humphrey was especially sympathetic to Autumn Leal's plight. Bonded familiars were actual magical creatures that could die, compared to Jason's summoned familiars. If Shade, Colin or Gordon were destroyed, their spirit's simply returned to the astral and Jason could resummon them. When Autumn lost her familiar, Humphrey could not help but think about losing Stash and how devastated he would be.

"I could go with skipping the celebration ball, though," Sophie said. "Why do the rest of us need to go?"

After months of monsters and extradimensional invasions, the dimensional membrane that normally kept such problems away had finally repaired itself. The Magic Society made public announcements and Rimaros, like the rest of the world, was in celebrations.

A lengthy festival was taking place, despite the devastation and loss the surge had brought. If only for a short time, people needed some release after monsters and death and mobile cities attacking by land, sea and air. The monster surge had been the longest and most devastating in recorded history, bringing with it not one but two interdimensional invasions, only one of which had been dealt with.

Rural populations needed to leave the cities and fortress towns, returning to what would often be monster-ravaged towns and villages around the Storm Kingdom. Infrastructure would need to be rebuilt and industries built back up. More than just the monster surge, the state of readiness the world had been in for a good five years prior to the surge had hurt economies, closed business and turned boom towns into ghost towns.

The repercussions would likely still be felt by the time of the next surge, but for one cathartic week, the repopulation, rebuilding and the messengers that had hidden themselves away could wait.

"The festivals on the streets are the real celebration," Rufus said. "This ball for the aristocracy is just a show. The first round in the next cycle of political gamesmanship. With everything being up in the air, a lot of power is up for grabs."

"So why should Jason put himself up for grabs with it?" Sophie asked. "Anyone with real power will either know Jason isn't genuinely leaving the team, or be able to easily find out. So why bother with the show?"

"It's not about convincing them that I'm going off somewhere," Jason said. "It's about giving them a sense of control. These are people used to holding power, and there's been a lot going on that they don't understand and have no influence over. A lot of that is centred on this pagoda and me sitting in it. Normally, their response to something like that is to take or, failing that, kill it. By jumping through some hoops for them now, I become more of a known quantity, and demonstrate that at least someone can bring me to heel."

"Except that's total crap and you go berserk when people try to control you," Sophie said.

"Yes, but we won't be telling people that. I told you: it's a show. I don't want to spend the next few years fending off people who think that I'm some kind of rogue threat."

"You are some kind of rogue threat," Sophie said.

"Again, *please* don't tell people that at the party."

"I hope you don't think one party is going to put a stop to people thinking that they can or should come after you," Neil said.

"Of course not," Jason said. "There will always be someone with too much ambition, too much stupidity or both. But most of the people at this ball are just concerned about a

loose power running around during times that are already uncertain. The Adventure Society and the royal family can parade me around, showing everyone what a good boy I am. Then I'm no longer an unknown threat to anyone's ambitions or just the general welfare of the Kingdom."

"You think any nobles care about the welfare of the populace?" Belinda asked. "Good luck finding one."

"There's no shortage of selfish nobles," Jason admitted. "But some, I assume, are good people."

"Nope," Sophie said. "They all suck."

"Based on your long history of robbing them?" Rufus asked pointedly.

"Yes," Sophie said.

"You realise that Humphrey and I are both from aristocratic families, right?" Neil asked.

"Yeah, but he's pretty and you're the healer. I've seen the things they hide away. Mostly while stealing them. Your aunt Clarice has a hideous doll collection, by the way, Neil. I have no idea why she locks it up, because no one is going to steal that, trust me."

"You broke into my house?"

"There's no point breaking into poor people's houses," Belinda said. "They don't have any money. I suppose if you're crap at breaking into places."

"The point is," Sophie said, "That I've seen the things they hide. The worse they are, the harder they work to make themselves seem good. Humphrey and his mum might be nice and clean, but even Humphrey will tell you that not all of his family are like them."

"We all have secrets we hide," Humphrey said. "Things we're ashamed of."

Everyone stopped eating and turned to look at Humphrey.

"What?" he asked.

"What do you have to be ashamed of?" Neil asked.

"My entire point was that we *don't* tell people those things," Humphrey said. "That's why they're secrets."

"You keep saying 'we,' but I don't think you have anything you're ashamed of," Belinda said.

"Of course he does," Jason said. "I bet it's that one time, as a boy, he secretly pilfered some condensed milk from the pantry."

"No," Gary said. "I bet he skipped out on training once to read a book on how to maintain a humble demeanour when people won't stop looking into your sensuous eyes, like molten bowls of dark chocolate."

“Sophie,” Belinda said. “What’s Humphrey’s deep dark secret?”

Sophie finished chewing on a mouthful of salad as everyone looked at her.

“He accidentally killed a baby,” she said casually. “This salad dressing is fantastic. Can I get some of this on a sandwich?”

As she shoved another forkful of salad into her mouth, Humphrey was looking more and more like a boiling kettle.

“I DID NOT ACCIDENTALLY KILL A BABY!”

“You did say that *not* admitting it was the entire point,” Jason observed.

“Yeah, he definitely killed that baby,” Neil said.

“I did not kill a baby!”

“It’s a helpless little baby, bro. I know it was supposedly an accident, but how could you?”

“Of course he had to say it was an accident,” Gary pointed out. “Plus, it’s his word against that of a dead baby, so that’s probably how he got away with it.”

Estella, watching the group continue roasting Humphrey, leaned towards Neil, who was also staying out of it.

“Is it always like this?”

“More-or-less.”

“Aren’t you all meant to be some group of elite adventurers?”

“I’d consider our capabilities adequate.”

“I was expecting more... I don’t know. Dignity, I guess.”

“Admittedly, it’s more like this with Jason around,” Clive told her. “He has a way of setting the tone. But it’s a good thing. Dignity is for outsiders; a face we put on, as needed. We let Humphrey take the lead with that. But we’ve seen some serious things. Lots of death, lives ruined. Adventurers often meet people on the worst days of their lives. Being able to have a little fun helps keep us sane.”

“Jason knows that better than most,” Farrah said, from where she was sat next to Clive. “He and I were trapped in another world for a few years, and we saw some serious business. Sometimes you need people who understand and accept you, and if you don’t have that, things can get extremely bleak.”

“He asked me to come work for him.”

“As an auxiliary, I know,” Clive said. “We try to avoid letting Jason make major decisions for the team without discussing them first. Unfortunately, they keep cropping up while we’re busy trying to not die. It’s a good life, but even if you’re not fighting for us, spying for us will be far from risk-free.”

Estella looked at the boisterous people loudly devouring their lunch. Being risk-averse had always been important to her. Too much risk was the very thing that had led to her falling out with her previous employer. As she watched the group, saw their care for one other, having fun together, she saw something she'd never had for herself.

Estella's parents had been adventurers, dying when she was young. She had been raised by her grandfather who never pushed her towards adventuring, not wanting to lose her the way he had his son. Estella had always been solitary by nature, but the loss of her grandfather had changed something. The absence of the one real connection she had to another person left her feeling untethered. Perhaps it was time to start re-evaluating what she wanted and what she was willing to do to get it.

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"I don't like you going to him," Sophie said. "Smells like a trap."

"Everything smells like a trap to you," Neil said.

"That's because anything we run into out there is likely to be a trap."

Jason and his team, plus Rufus, Gary and Farrah, were tooling up for a fight. While they kept most of their gear in dimensional spaces, Jason had placed a ready room full of excess equipment they might need for any given mission. Their gear was stowed on the second-highest level of the pagoda, in what amounted to a locker room.

He had also installed more fireman's poles, but these were hidden behind a conspicuous bookcase that was opened by a hidden switch in an equally conspicuous bust on a small table. The poles ran from the ready room down a secret shaft to another hidden door in the atrium. Each pole was labelled with the name of a team member, except for one. Neil's pole was labelled 'Robin', instead of with his name.

"The possibility of a trap is why I picked the location," Jason said. "Which Estella won't be sharing with Estos until it's time for him to head there."

"You should have picked here," Sophie said.

"The only reason I agreed to this meeting is because of a name that Havi Estos dropped, and the person belonging to that name has a lot of eyes and ears. He's already in hiding, and if he hears that Estos is paying me a visit, he may disappear entirely. Again."

"And who is this mysterious person whose name you've been declining to tell us?" Sophie asked. She watched Jason as he glanced at Belinda, who shrugged.

"It's Killian Laurent," Jason said.

"Who is Killi... wait, isn't he the guy that put a star seed in you and then vanished?"

"With a good deal of the Silva crime family's money and resources, no less," Clive said. "There was some concern you might get a little, uh, *enthused*, once you found out."

“Why would you think that?” Sophie asked.

“Because you tore half of Old City apart when Jason went missing,” Belinda said.

“Well, now I can tear him apart, if we’ve found him.”

Jason’s kidnapping and star seed implantation was orchestrated by crime boss Cole Silva and local Magic Society Director Lucian Lamprey, in Greenstone. These were the enemies he had made by shielding Sophie from them, which did not sit well with her. After a lifetime of everyone trying to use her, the one person who helped change her life for no more reason than she needed it had paid the price for doing so. For all her frenzied searching, she had found nothing and failed to contribute to Jason’s rescue. Silva and Lamprey had both been caught and punished, but the man who did their dirty work had escaped.

As it turned out, Silva’s henchman, Killian Laurent, had been working behind the scenes on his own plan. For him, Jason had been a conveniently powerful distraction for Cole Silva, allowing Laurent to enact well-laid plans to plunder the Silva crime family and escape the city.

“Are you sure we can trust Estella?”

“She can only hide her emotions from my perception if I don’t push,” Jason said. “I pushed.”

“That’s not a guarantee,” Clive pointed out. “There’s a possibility that a false aura was magically overlaid on hers. Admittedly, anyone who can do that well enough to fool you, Jason, is probably more trouble than we can deal with anyway. Someone like that could probably come down on us like a hammer the moment we’re away from the safety of the pagoda.”

Jason moved to the bust and unhinged the head to reveal the switch that moved the bookcase, revealing the poles. Jason watched the bookcase move across with deep satisfaction.

“Jason.”

“Yes, Humphrey?”

“We’re portalling out of here.”

“We can portal from the atrium.”

“We can also portal from here.”

“This room is securely shielded against portals,” Jason said. “We need to leave so we can portal out. Tell him, Clive.”

“He’s lying,” Clive said flatly. “He can portal us out of here just fine.”

“Bloke, why would you do me like that?”

“Jason, my parents and eels?”

“Hey, there was a clearly posted sign telling you to not go in there. And why. You didn’t go in did you?”

“No, I didn’t go in! What kind of idiot calls *you* on a bluff?”

The rest of the group nodded their agreement.

“I can’t help wondering about how active you had to be in creating that scene, Jason,” Neil wondered aloud. “Did you sit down and write out how it was going to go? How detailed was it? How long did it take to craft the illusion of Clive’s parents and some eels, tweaking and correcting as you went?”

“I can speak for all of us in saying that we don’t want to hear the answer to that,” Humphrey said. “Jason, please just portal us out.”

“Actually,” Belinda said, “I’d like to hear—”

“I can speak for *all of us*,” Humphrey repeated, “in saying that we don’t want to hear it. Portal, Jason.”

Jason grinned as he went to open a portal, then stopped.

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- [Astral Gate] has detected portal tracking magic. Spirit domain prevents tracking within the domain, but external destinations remain subject to tracking effects.
  - Backlash from using [Astral Gate] to reconfigure portal to avoid tracking: low.
  - Would you like to reconfigure portal to avoid tracking?
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“Huh,” he said.

“What is it?” Rufus asked.

“Someone is tracking portal use in the area. Not really a surprise.”

“All portal use on Livaros is tracked,” Farrah said. “The Magic Society does it, in conjunction with the Adventure Society. Part defence measure, part policing measure.”

“That involves a lot of infrastructure, though,” Clive pointed out. “Infrastructure that doesn’t exist here on Arnote. Setting up a tracking blanket without it is fairly high-end ritual magic.”

“It’s not news that it’s the top end of town that’s paying attention to us here,” Belinda said.

“We don’t want to be tracked where we’re going,” Humphrey said. “We should call it off.”

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “I can tweak the portal to avoid the tracking.”

“How?” Clive asked. “If it was that simple, why would anyone use tracking magic?”

“Not everyone has the thing I keep behind the eel-porn doors.”

Jason opened a portal, which looked normal but his blue and orange eyes started glowing brightly and he grunted as pain wracked his head. A small wall of cloud material rose from the ground and he leaned back into it heavily.

“Ow.”

“Are alright?” Farrah asked.

“Yeah. Just a minor backlash for overstepping my rank. Give me a minute.”

Jason’s companions looked on with worry, and while Jason had been optimistic, it was only a few minutes before the pain passed.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”

## Chapter 597

### More Than Just a Name

The streets of Livaros were thronging with people as the central areas were overtaken by a sprawling street festival. The market district was the heart of the post-surge celebrations, but it extended into the boutique store ward and even the Adventure Society campus. Tables had been brought out and food stalls were everywhere, while the Magic Society had released thousands of colour-changing paper lanterns that were drifting over the streets, illuminating everything in myriad colours.

Jason stood on a rooftop, his cloak dimmed down and blending into the shadows of the late evening. Sophie was standing beside him, significantly more obvious. The rest of their companions were elsewhere, either waiting at the meeting sight or in place for other tasks, all connected through voice chat.

“Ooh, the food smells wafting up here,” Jason said with yearning. “I could pop down there and grab us something real quick.”

“No,” Humphrey scolded. He, like the rest of the team, was positioned elsewhere. “We talked about this, Jason. You agreed to play the ominous harbinger, which means no popping down to check out food stalls.”

“It’s not like anyone would recognise me; I’d be completely anonymous.”

“That’s a lie and you know it,” Farrah said. “I’m betting that most of these food stalls are run by the people who run the same stalls at the market. Do not even bother trying to convince us that they won’t recognise you.”

“Not to mention that you have a very bad track record on staying anonymous,” Clive added.

“Sophie could go down there,” Jason said. “No one’s looking for her.”

“Thankfully,” Sophie added. “I’ve had quite enough of that in my life, thank you.”

“You want Sophie to go down there,” Humphrey said. “The most beautiful woman in the city, dressed head to toe in white adventuring gear. Very subtle.”

“You are such a suck-up,” Jason pouted.

“I think it’s sweet,” Belinda said. “But yes, she does rather stand out.”

Sophie stood out in her new armour of white with silver embellishments. Figure-hugging yet utterly flexible, like Sophie herself, it focused on mobility rather the protectiveness. She had acquired the armour while Jason was still in recovery, through Neil’s looting power, from an unusual ooze-type monster. She had not enjoyed fighting the silver-star jelly, but was very satisfied with the spoils.

“There are lots of adventurers out there,” Jason complained and Sophie put a hand on his shoulder.

“I asked Belinda to go around grabbing anything that looked good,” she said. “It’ll come out of her storage space nice and fresh. I know it’s not the same as being down there, but it’s something.”

Jason turned to look at Sophie, pushing the hood back off his head.

“Thank you,” he said, his smile an uncharacteristic non-smirk. “That’s really thoughtful of you.”

After a lifetime of mistrust, Sophie was still learning about companionship and her rare expression of bashfulness made Jason smile wider.

“Belinda was meant to be intercepting the target,” Humphrey said.

“I can do both,” Belinda said. “Jason’s going to sense him long before I can get eyes on him, anyway.”

“How are we doing with that?” Humphrey asked.

“We left his warded compound in the warehouse district with a couple of bodyguards,” Estella said through voice chat. “We took a carriage until we hit the festival crowds and then started moving on foot.”

Estella was also included in the voice chat as she directed Havi Estos to the meeting site.

“He doesn’t have a flight travel permit?” Neil asked.

“Temporarily suspended for the duration of the festival,” Estella explained. “He’s not happy about it, either.”

“Most of them have been suspended,” Rufus added.

“And the guilds aren’t happy about it either, from what I’m overhearing,” Belinda said. “You can tell a guild adventurer here more from their complaints than their gear, although anyone fully tooled up to fight monsters at a festival is probably a complete tool themselves.”

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“I don’t like this,” Havi Estos said as he made his way through the crowd. “It’s the perfect chance to get in some assassinations. This week will probably see more of them than the rest of the year combined.”

“You’re worried about being assassinated,” Estella told him, “I can’t tell if you think too highly or too poorly about yourself.”

“Being assassinated isn’t a matter of character,” Havi said. “It’s a matter of being an obstacle to someone with no scruples.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t surround yourself with people lacking scruples. Look, no one is going to... oh, wow; that guy is definitely going to assassinate you.”

“What? What guy?”

The two bodyguards went on alert. They had shortswords as large weapons were generally less effective in the city, as well as being more attention-grabbing.

“That guy,” Estella said, pointing. “He’s hiding his aura fairly well, but I’m, you know, me.”

The man in question started running.

“Don’t chase,” Havi ordered his bodyguards. “He might be trying to lure you away.”

They carried on at a hustle, the bodyguards often rudely shouldering the way through the crowd. Only Estella noticed Belinda start trailing them, occasionally changing her face.

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Like the tentacles of an octopus, arms made of darkness emerged from different shadows to drag people out of sight.

“That’s the fourth group that has been looking to kill this guy,” Jason said as he dropped the last unconscious man onto the pile on the roof. “He’s got more people after him than I do. Maybe he should be the one faking his identity and skipping town.”

“The people after him are a little lower on the threat scale,” Rufus pointed out.

“Still, four assassination attempts in one walk across town?”

“Not to mention the other two we stopped against unrelated people,” Humphrey said. “And I know for a fact that the Adventure Society has people quietly patrolling as well, so who knows how much is going on.”

“I wish you’d told me that earlier,” Jason said. “I almost tried to take one of them out until I realised from his aura that he was watch for threats, not being one. That would have been embarrassing.”

“Especially if you got your butt kicked,” Neil added.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed with a laugh.

“Estos was right about it being a prime chance for assassinations,” Estella said.

“Not to mention robbery,” Belinda added. “I’ve spotted I don’t know how many pickpockets. They know their business in this city, too. The deftness with which they dispel anti-theft wards is impressive. I might go find who taught them, swap some tips.”

“You’re not a thief anymore, Lindy,” Humphrey pointed out.

“Uh, yep,” Belinda agreed. “Definitely not.”

“Belinda..”

“We’re approaching the destination,” Estella notified them.

“Site is secure,” Rufus said.

“I put up some extra anti-surveillance magic,” Farrah said, “but what was already in place is surprisingly thorough.”

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Havi Estos, Estella and the two bodyguards reached the boutique shopping district where the festival was still going on, but was a bit more subdued. This was where the festival-goers tended to be a little higher in the social hierarchy, and letting loose too much could have political repercussions. It was still a celebration, just more company barbecue than spring break in tone.

“Honestly, I didn’t think we’d get this far and only see one attacker,” Havi Estos said. “Perhaps I overestimated the danger.”

“Exactly,” agreed Estella, who had shared none of her party interface communication with him.

They arrived at a plain cream-coloured storefront with no signage. There was only a display window with a dummy draped in a linen suit and topped with a Panama hat. The door opened at their approach, revealing a stern-faced Rufus. Havi looked at the tall, leanly-muscular adventure in front of him with midnight skin and striking good looks. The light of the colourful lanterns overhead was reflected from the man’s bald head so well that Havi absently wondered if he used some kind of wax polish.

“Havi Estos?” Rufus asked in a voice that made Havi wish he could just run instead of answering. This whole night was the reason he liked conducting business from his very secure home, but he felt he had little choice. He knew enough about Asano and his associates to recognise the man standing in front of him, and who that man’s grandfather was.

Havi was a very well connected man, so he had become aware that Jason Asano was now a person of significance. Perhaps Asano didn’t care that Havi once sent Estella to spy on him – he certainly seemed to have settled things with Estella Warnock. Havi didn’t have a respected uncle to mend fences, however. What he did have was information.

Like many in Rimaros, Havi had been tracking down every piece of information on Jason Asano. He had a broader base of information gathering than most, stretching from high nobility to base criminals. He was confident that no one else had yet realised the connections between Asano and local underworld figure Killian Laurent, but it was likely only a matter of time. As such, Havi needed to exploit that knowledge before it lost its value to him.

“Yes, I’m Havi Estos. Is Mr Asano inside?”

“Jason Asano has been with you for some time,” Rufus said.

Havi and his bodyguard looked around and found Jason standing next to Estella.

Havi tilted his head, feeling a dissonance in his mind. He suddenly realised that Asano had been walking with them for the last couple of streets, but for some reason, Havi had been ignoring his presence.

The bodyguards moved their hands toward their swords but their silver-rank auras were suddenly annihilated as if they weren’t there and they froze, stricken with fear. Asano’s presence was uncanny, almost part of the darkness as his cloak and the twilight seemed to blend together, making what was shadow and what was person unclear. How he did that while standing in the open Havi was unsure. It was like an optical illusion, his eyes sliding off as he tried to make out what was real and what wasn’t. It didn’t help that Asano didn’t register at all to Havi’s aura senses, as if he were looking at a picture and not the man himself.

“Jason,” Havi said. “You do prefer to be called Jason, right?”

“My friends call me Jason, Mr Estos.”

Asano’s voice had the icy hardness of winter granite, wholly unlike their previous meeting. Havi found himself missing the man’s previously friendly demeanour very much.

“Go inside, Mr Estos,” Rufus ordered. “Your employees can leave.”

Havi looked at the bodyguards that suddenly felt extremely inadequate to his needs.

“I need to get home safely after this meeting,” he said.

“If you go home again,” Jason said, “you will be delivered safely.”

Havi paled at Jason’s use of the word ‘if’ rather than ‘when.’ Even so, he dutifully followed Rufus inside. Waiting for them was a group of people Estos recognised from his information gathering on Asano. Just looking at the people around him was enough to know that Asano was not someone to take lightly. From prominent members of the Geller and Remore families to Clive Standish, whose relationship with the Magic Society would be a whole other investigation. If they had been in Vitesse instead of the far side of the world, no one in their right mind would dismiss the group.

The other person present was Alejandro Albericci, the proprietor of the tailor shop in which they stood. Albericci had his own formidable connections in Rimaros society and was not someone Havi would ever be interested in getting on the bad side of.

“Thank you for the use of your property, Mr Albericci,” Rufus said.

“Consider it my apology for being used to political ends when you first graced my establishment. I will go now, but be assured that no sound will escape these walls. And, as Miss Hurin can attest, it would take formidable effort to observe the interior magically.”

Alejandro departed through a rear door, leaving Havi surrounded as Belinda and Sophie came in to stand by Jason, Belinda closing the door behind her. Havi steeled his nerve to speak.

“Jas— Mr Asano. I’d like to—”

“Killian Laurent,” Jason said, cutting him off. “That name is the only reason any of us are here. I do hope you have more than just a name.”

“He was here, in the Storm Kingdom. After he plundered the wealth of the Silva family in Greenstone, he came here and set himself up in Jaitari.”

The three islands that made up the city of Rimaros were not the most populous regions of the Storm Kingdom. The largest concentrations of people were on a landmass in the centre of the Sea of Storms. Comprised of what was, in Jason's world, Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, was a single island; the largest in the Sea of Storms by far. Jaitari was the largest and most populous city on the island and the Storm Kingdom overall.

“Why here?” Jason asked. “Of all the places in the world, why the one that just happened to be where I arrived?”

“He was here long before you arrived,” Havi said. “I have no idea how you arrived here, or why. I’ve heard rumours that Soramir Rimaros knows, but even my ability to gather information has limits. But Laurent came here because he has family. Someone in the Order of Redeeming Light. A priest. The Adventure Society has him in custody, now. Maybe he can tell you more.”

“You think he can give us Killian Laurent?”

“I can give you Killian Laurent. When your name started spreading around, Mr Asano, Laurent heard about it and decided to get out. But that was a bad idea during a monster surge, especially this one. Too many people tracking too many things. Liquidating his assets and getting out of the region without drawing the attention of people hunting for Builder cultists or Order of Redeeming Light members meant relying on some extremely shady people. The kind of people that won’t talk to the government or the Adventure Society, but will talk to me.”

“You know where he is now?” Jason asked.

“No,” Havi said. “By design. If I went digging, word could get to him, sooner or later. I’m not the only information broker out there and he’s an extremely cautious man. But I am

certain I can find him, in fairly short order. Then it will be on you to move fast enough to get him before he moves again.”

Jason didn't respond for a long time, leaving Havi to look at the alien eyes that were all that could be seen from the otherwise-impenetrable darkness of Jason's hood.

"There's something else," Havi said. He hadn't intended to share this and instead use it to build his own influence base, but Jason's silent stare had unnerved him. "Laurent was the one who hired the adventurer that teleported the Order of Redeeming Light's people off that island. The new one that used to be the flying Builder city. He did it because his brother asked. The priest I talked about."

There was more silence. A line of dark flames moved along the ground, from which a portal arch of dark crystal noiselessly emerged. The dark flames rose to fill the arch, becoming an active portal.

"Go home, Mr Estos," Jason said.

"Do you want me to start narrowing down Laurent's location?"

"Soon. We'll be in touch."

Havi was uncertain about walking through a portal he didn't entirely trust, but he liked the idea a lot more than refusing to do so and staying surrounded by these people. He stepped through and emerged in his own home. The home that was warded against teleportation and portals. He turned to look at the portal he had just stepped through and watched it descend back into the floor, leaving a line of dark flames that vanished in turn.

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Humphrey caught Jason as he collapsed, the moment Havi had vanished.

"Yeah, that was worse," he croaked. "I have to stop using this astral gate."

"If you'd just let me study it," Clive said, "maybe we could alleviate the issues."

"If Dawn said to wait for higher rank," Farrah told him, "then it's best to wait."

"I'm going to teleport Jason back to the pagoda," Humphrey said. "Rufus, please thank Mr Albericci again and let him know that we're done."

## Chapter 598

### The Making of That Man

Havi Estos was not used to feeling insignificant. His connections spanned from the very top of society to the very bottom, and he was valuable enough to both that he had secured his position as the consummate middleman. He was also a successful former silver-rank adventurer. Perhaps not from a top guild, but certainly from a respectable one, and any adventurer that could hold their own in Rimaros was worthy of note.

After emerging from Asano's portal, Havi took an icy shower, then found himself staring in his bathroom mirror. He was a sizeable man, with onyx skin and gold eyes that matched his long hair. He looked at his expression and could see for himself how shaken he looked.

He had only met Asano once, when he dropped off a package from Havi's old adventuring friend, Mordant Kerr. Kerr had been in charge of a fortress town during the surge and sent Asano with a package containing a recording of Asano wiping out a monster wave threatening that town. Havi had thought nothing of the ordinary-seeming man until he looked at the recording after he was gone.

Kerr had wanted to connect Havi and Asano, recognising that Asano could use Havi's contacts and Havi would do well to get on good terms before Asano's rise to prominence. The disparity between the amiable man he met and the slaughter machine in the recording had triggered Havi's sense of caution and he had begun investigating. Asano unexpectedly catching wind of it had cost Havi the valuable services of Estella Warnock, whose grandfather was another of Havi's adventuring contemporaries.

Asano's name came up in the course of Havi's general practice of knowing things that most people didn't, in increasingly alarming ways. Asano's connections reached the top of Rimaros society, somehow coming in a downward direction from some elusive upper echelon to which even the royal family seemed to bend. It remained a mystery until the active presence of Soramir Rimaros, the founder of the Storm Kingdom himself, became known.

The more Asano's name came to his attention, the more Havi had grown concerned. Others were coming to him as an information broker for details on Asano, which Havi had continued to gather, albeit much more carefully than he had before. He had seen what Asano's enemies looked like, what had come of them, and worried that Asano might consider the slight of Havi sending someone to probe his aura as antagonistic.

Asano's enemies list was formidable, relative to his rank, and the mysteries surrounding him were highly suggestive. What had come of those enemies did not bode well for anyone who caught Asano's ire: what did it take to make a personal enemy of the dimensional being waging war on an entire world?

Havi was wary of approaching Asano, even though it was possible Asano hadn't given Havi a second thought. Bringing himself back to Asano's attention could have been buying real trouble to avoid imaginary danger, but it had not been something he was willing to risk. He didn't want to be on Asano's enemies list, having seen Asano's other enemies. But his enquiries into Asano's past had turned up one enemy that stood out from the others, for having gotten away.

Killian Laurent was already known to Havi, but only by reputation. Havi might work with some less-than-reputable figures, but Laurent was known for having no depth to which he would not stoop. There were no lines he would not cross, no villain he wouldn't work with and no depravity he would not exploit.

The more he looked into it, the more that Laurent seemed like the way to turn things around with Asano. He'd missed out on an opportunity to make a connection with an adventurer with mysterious influence in the corridors of power and whose rise to prominence seemed inevitable. Delivering Killian Laurent on a plate could rectify that mistake in a big way.

Havi was still making preparations when Asano's predicted leap into wider attention came both sooner and more ostentatiously than Havi's most outlandish predictions. Asano's display of his aura blanketing the sky and his transforming house was something everyone became aware of. What came next, though, didn't just grab the attention of the powerful and well informed; it scared them. Asano telling the Builder to pack up and go home was one thing. The Builder actually doing it was another.

It was clear to the many observers that Asano was not just dealing with gods and great astral beings but that he had been for some time. Where had he gone during the mysterious period he was believed dead? What had he done, and why was he back? Havi only had answers to some of those questions, and unreliable ones, at that.

Getting on Asano's good side had very much landed on the top of Havi's priority list and he had accelerated his preparations to serve up Laurent. He had not pushed so hard as to spook Laurent, or at least, so he had thought. Leaving his bathroom in a soft robe, he discovered that he had made two critical underestimations. One was Laurent's ability to realise he was being looked into, and the other was Laurent's ability to bypass the protection magic on his house.

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“Wow, that was fast,” Belinda said she watched five men move an unconscious Havi out of his house and into a carriage. It set off down the street, in the direction of the docks. There was no shortage of drunken revellers on the streets, but the warehouse district was fairly clear and the docks weren’t a festival area. The vehicle would be able to pass through without being blocked by crowds.

Jason’s voice chat didn’t extend from Livaros where Belinda was to the pagoda where Humphrey had teleported him to recuperate from overstressing his portal ability again. She relayed the information through Shade, hidden in her shadow.

“Already?” Jason complained when Shade reported the information. He had barely laid down to rest. “Come on, I’m still wrecked from portalling Estos through his damn house wards. It’s going to be a couple of hours before I’m combat-ready again.”

“I told you it was the wrong move,” Neil said. “As the team healer, I strongly advise against harming yourself just so you can show off an ability that would be better kept secret anyway.”

“Agreed,” Humphrey said. “Shade, is Estos still alive?”

Most of the group was in a lounge area, gathered around the reclining Jason, either portalled back by Clive or teleported in by Humphrey. Only Sophie and Belinda had stayed to watch Laurent’s home on Belinda’s hunch.

“He is alive,” Shade said. “Miss Belinda would also like me to iterate that she was, indeed, correct.”

As they chatted in Alejandro’s store following Havi’s dismissal, Belinda had voiced the opinion that Havi was underestimating his exposure to Laurent.

“We already know he’s tipped off target’s he’s been looking into in the past,” she had said. “I’m guessing that Laurent might turn the tables, maybe try and set a trap for Jason. I say we watch the guy and see if Laurent makes a move in the wake of Estos meeting with us.”

“That would mean Laurent would have to know about Estos meeting with us,” Humphrey pointed out.

“Yep,” Belinda had agreed.

The result was the team’s illicit activity specialists keeping a watch on Havi’s place, and they had barely arrived when five men moved an unconscious Havi from his home into waiting transport.

“Tell Belinda to track the carriage,” Humphrey said. “Hopefully, it will lead us to Laurent and we can jump on him before he lays a trap for us.”

“Unless this *is* the trap for us,” Jason pointed out. “You know, I think we might be approaching this the wrong way.”

“How so?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t think Laurent is going to be a big fan of playing fair, so why should we?”

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Havi was unconscious, bound to a thick metal pole by heavy chains. Even with a suppression collar, the raw strength of a silver ranker was no small thing, so both the poles and the chains had been strongly reinforced with magic. Killian Laurent took the stopper from a small alchemical vial and waved it under Havi’s nose.

Havi awoke with a start.

“Steal some mushrooms!” he yelled deliriously.

“What?” Killian asked.

“What?” a bleary-eyed Havi asked in return, head swaying as he blinked, his senses slowly coming back. He looked around, seeing that he was in a featureless room where the walls, floor and ceiling were all metal. It had no windows but a pair of large doors, suggesting it might be some kind of warehouse.

He had a groggy recollection of being woken in similar fashion and threatened with unpleasantly specific forms of violence if he didn’t go through a portal. As his senses somewhat cleared, he looked at the emaciated and sickly white man standing in front of him. He had never seen Killian Laurent, but the man perfectly fit Laurent’s distinctive description.

“Oh, crap.”

"Indeed," Killian agreed. "You wanted to use me as a resource? To feed me to Jason Asano? You should have stuck to information trading, Mr Estos, because information gathering is not your area."

“You won’t get away with kidnapping me right out of the city.”

“Oh, I know. Jason Asano has developed quite the remarkable team since I last met him. I don’t know exactly how they’ll track us down. Maybe the former thief secretly placed tracking magic on you during your meeting. Perhaps the astral magic specialist will trace the portal used to bring you here. My people made sure they left the city’s tracking area before portalling from a boat at sea, but I don’t think that will stop them. They are quite the resourceful group. Powerful, as well, which is why I’ve taken the time to set things up quite thoroughly. The only reason I’m keeping you alive is in case there’s some tracking magic I can’t sense on you that will be negated on your death.”

Killian moved close to Havi. Killian was shorter by almost a full head, but grinned malevolently as he tilted his head back to lock eyes with the former adventurer.

“Once I realised that you were looking into me, I started moving things into place. I could have run, but that was not a convenient approach, given all this monster surge unpleasantness. Instead, I made sure that it would look like I was running to anyone who bothered to investigate, so it looked like I was being sloppy. I thought it was best to give you a little sense of urgency, so you would be the one who got sloppy. Which you did. You’re a good middleman, Estos, but your expertise lies in helping upstanding citizens connect with not-so-upstanding citizens, without being seen with the riffraff. This spider-at-the-heart-of-an-information-web thing you’re trying to expand into isn’t going to work.”

“Laurent,” Havi said. “I know you’re evil. You don’t have to make a big speech explaining your plan to prove it.”

Killian chuckled as he turned to put a little distance between Havi and himself.

“Bravado. I like it. I have a client who enjoys breaking down the tough ones, so you’ll be quite lucrative for me. Once Asano and his team are dealt with, which is no small thing. You won’t sense them, with that suppression collar on, but there is a coterie of gold-rank mercenaries here, waiting for the arrival of Asano and his team. I know better than to take them on directly with anything but massively overwhelming force.”

Killian shook his head.

“It’s unfathomably expensive to hire discreet gold-rankers who will work outside of the normal channels, you know. Fortunately, the monster surge has been very lucrative for me.”

“Tragedy often is, to bastards with no scruples,” Havi said, spitting out the words like a curse. “You’ll work with anyone. Builder cult, Red Table, those Purity lunatics.”

“Yes,” Killian agreed with a laugh. “It’s been working out quite nicely for me. But if I’d known he would eventually cost me this much money and attention, I’d never have left Asano alive. At the time, it seemed like a worthwhile distraction, since I didn’t want his friends seeking me out in anger. I’m not sure if you know who Danielle Geller is, but she’s not someone you want motivated to hunt you down, believe me.”

“Neither is Asano,” Havi said.

“That’s certainly true now, which is why I’m going to all this effort. Who would have thought that he would fight off a star seed, even if the ritual powering it was left unattended? You know, I rather think I was the making of that man. I could never have foreseen setting in motion a chain of events that would have my dear brother helping the Builder arrange for him to arrive here from another world. Asano lives an inconveniently

outrageous life, which I now need to put a stop to. Luckily, you aren't the only one with some impressive connections, and certain people are likewise eager to see Asano's demise. Otherwise, I might not have been able to arrange all these gold-rankers, no matter how much money I threw around."

"Boss," one of Killian's thuggish lackeys said. He had been monitoring a magical projection floating over a ritual on the floor behind where Havi was chained up, out of his line of sight. The projection displayed the intricate web of alarm arrays placed around their location.

"Ah," Killian said. "It seems like the guests have arrived. I assume Asano brought his full team, plus the Remore boy and his team as well."

"Boss, I'm not so sure this is Asano. The alarms are picking up a whole bunch of gold-rankers."

"What?"

## Chapter 599

### A Lesson of Days Gone

In the aftermath of the fighting, a small army of gold and silver rankers were sweeping the area for escape tunnels, traps and anyone who had managed to hide away. The adventurers were a combined force of the Sapphire Crown guild, who served the royal family, and Amouz family members. The Amouz family had volunteered in numbers that surprised even Liara, whose husband was born into it.

Killian Laurent had taken the place of Havi Estos in being chained to a thick metal pole with a suppression collar around his neck. Even more precautions had been added, in the form of a layered ritual array sufficiently complex that Clive, Belinda and Farrah were both studying it enthusiastically. The gold-rank ritualist who had put it in place was looking harried as they peppered him with questions.

Sound could not pass through the edge of the ritual circle, which was currently empty save for Killian. Just outside it, Liara and Jason were standing together, talking quietly as they watched Killian, who stared back in turn.

"I've been obsessing over finding the portal user who helped the Order of Redeeming Light for a while," Liara said. "The order members themselves still won't talk, and we've had some of them for months now. Their god wasn't even their god and they're still zealots."

"Carlos says that we need to stop thinking of them as ideologues and start thinking of them as victims," Jason said. "Just as much as people turned into vampires."

"I'm well aware of what Carlos thinks," Liara said. "The Adventure Society turned all my prisoners over to the Church of the Healer. You think this man will be more forthcoming?"

"He's practical. Self-serving. He'll be willing to make some kind of deal."

"And you're alright with that? I know what he did to you."

"Here's something that won't be in the Adventure Society's file on me," Jason told her. "While I was in the other world, one of the very few gold rankers there killed my brother, my lover and my friend. When the time came, and I had him at my mercy, I gave him to someone else for their own revenge. I was burning so hot for vengeance at the start, but I came to realise that it's just empty."

"You had a gold ranker at your mercy?"

"Circumstances," he said. "My whole life is exploiting circumstances to stay alive when, by every sensible metric, I should die. Or stay dead; it varies."

"You made the right choice calling us in. Not just because of what was waiting for you here, but it plays into the story we're trying to sell about your willingness to defer to the Adventure Society. Giving up personal vengeance for the communal good will sit well with people who know your going off with Soramir is just a charade. Some of them worry that you roaming around in secret is worse than letting you do so openly."

"Let," Jason said, dissatisfaction in his voice as he zeroed in on her word choice.

"Yes, Jason. Let. The point is to demonstrate that you're not a madman on the loose with unknown powers, answering to no one."

"Team player, that's me," he grumbled.

"If you're going to leave Killian to us, would you like to speak to him first, or walk away entirely?"

"I may be willing to walk away from revenge," Jason said, "but I won't be giving up on villain banter. I don't have it in me."

She gave him a flat look.

"Yeah, I know," he complained. "No-fun, stern-adventurer Jason."

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Cassin Amouz had not participated in the raid itself but had been the driving force behind the Amouz family's contribution to the operation. He arrived in the aftermath, being shown into the warehouse by some of his own people. He spotted Liara speaking to a man wrapped in what looked like a portal, who had to be Jason Asano. Cassin strode over to Liara as Asano stepped inside the ritual circle and approached the prisoner.

"Princess Liara," he greeted.

"Lord Amouz. Thank you again for your support of this operation."

"Consider me motivated to root out all the people who have betrayed our Kingdom and our world. This sickly thing you have chained up knows the traitor who helped take my son?"

Liara nodded as Cassin looked around.

"And the other thing?" he asked. "She's here?"

Liara nodded to where Clive, Farrah and Belinda were still badgering the ritualist with questions.

"Darker skin," she said, to differentiate the fair-skinned Farrah from the swarthy Belinda.

Cassin moved over to them.

"Belinda Callahan?" he said.

"I didn't take it," Belinda said, pointing at Clive. "I saw him doing something; I'm pretty sure it was him."

"What was him?" Cassin asked as Clive rolled his eyes and went back to examining the ritual diagram on the ground.

"Nothing," Belinda said. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Farrah sighed, giving Belinda a look she normally reserved for Jason.

"I'm Farrah Hurin," she introduced herself. "And yes, this is Belinda Callahan. You're Lord Cassin Amouz, are you not?"

"I am. I've wanted to take the chance to thank you, Miss Callahan. The bold risk you took in infiltrating the Order of Redeeming Light's stronghold is the reason my son was brought home before they finished infecting him with their heinous magic. You have the eternal gratitude of the Amouz family, and me, his father, most of all. If you ever have need of anything at all—"

"Ooh, free stuff!"

Farrah sharply nudged Belinda with her elbow.

"I mean, you're very welcome," Belinda corrected.

"How is Young Master Gibson?" Farrah asked.

"Yeah," Belinda said, her tone suddenly less playful. "He wasn't in the best way, last time I saw him. I wasn't in time to help him."

"Yes you were," Cassin said. "The specialist from the Church of the healer is optimistic. *Cautiously* optimistic, as he repeatedly specifies, but it's hope."

He settled his gaze firmly on Belinda.

"Hope that you have given me," he told her. "And I meant it when I said if you ever need anything. All the free stuff you can carry."

"You may want to rethink that offer, lord Amouz," Farrah said. "She has a storage space power and a lot of imagination."

Belinda didn't say anything glib, thrown by the sincerity of Cassin's gratitude. It was not something she was used to and she suddenly felt awkward. He recognised that and nodded.

"I have a lot to organise here, so I shall leave you now. But the door of the Amouz family is always open to you, Miss Callahan."

When Cassin left, Farrah nudged Belinda's shoulder.

"Feels good, doesn't it? Genuinely helping someone. It's why you're better off being an adventurer than a thief."

“You’re right,” Belinda said, holding up a pocket watch. “You should probably have this back.”

Farrah frowned as she took it from Belinda’s hand.

“How did you even get this?”

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Enveloped in a starry void, Jason looked more like he was floating than walking as he moved, but he dismissed the cloak as he reached Killian. He stood in front of the pale elf chained to a thick metal pole. Killian had a narrow, bony frame and pallid skin, which was unlike the normally hale appearance that even elves that weren’t essence users had.

“You certainly look more impressive than the last time I saw you, Asano.”

“You look about the same. I’m told that each time we rank up, we get closer to how we are represented in our souls. That makes your soul pretty damn ugly.”

“And yours tediously vain. You’re a lot prettier at silver rank, Asano.”

“I look more like my brother than I used to. That used to annoy me.”

Killian narrowed his eyes.

“He died, didn’t he? Your fault?”

“Not my fault. It was another selfish prick like you.”

“Ah,” Killian said. “My mistake was that I assumed that you would seek me out in vengeance for what I’ve done to you. It never actually occurred to me that you would be willing to bring in outsiders and let them take that from you. But it seems you’ve tasted vengeance and found it not to your liking.”

“You seem rather calm, given the circumstances.”

“Oh, I have many secrets, many resources and contacts; knowledge and insights that are very valuable. Especially to groups that cannot do what I have done, yet desire what I have gained from doing them. Organisations tend to make deals with people as useful as me, rather than killing us for our many transgressions.”

“Which is what will happen here, I’m sure. So long as they’re adequately fed, I imagine you’ll live long enough to finagle your freedom again, sooner or later. We live very long lives.”

“And you can accept all that? I thought you were an idealist.”

“I was. Still am, I hope. But I’ve come to realise that taking the best that things *can* be is better than lamenting the way they *should* be.”

“A man of compromise, now?”

“Maybe. Sometimes it feels like I’m the only one willing to do what it takes to turn what should be into what can.”

“You sound tired, Asano.”

“Actually, I’m better than I’ve been in a long time. I’m just tired of compromising with people like you. That’s why the Adventure Society can have you. Make a deal, kill you, let you go; I wash my hands of it. I was done with you a long time ago.”

“Yet you couldn’t resist talking to me.”

“It’s true. I’m testing myself, I think. Can I let what you’ve done go and leave you to the authorities and whatever slack they may cut you?”

“And how is the test going?”

“Unremarkably. I’m a little surprised, to be honest. Until I heard your name again, I hadn’t thought about you in a long time. Turns out it’s because I didn’t care.”

“Is the same true for your pet thief with the pretty silver hair? She’s been giving me a look that says she wants to kill me.”

“That’s because she does want to kill you. But she didn’t spare you a thought either, until your name came up. You’re a target of opportunity, and that’s all. At the end of the day, you just don’t matter. You’re a lesson of days gone.”

“Listen to you. You’re quite the big shot, now, but I’ve seen you naked and helpless. Not just without your clothes, but without that ridiculous mask you use to hide away the malevolence inside you.”

“I don’t hide it, Laurent. Not anymore. I use it, as needed, and then I put it away until the next prick like you comes along. But you know, if I asked these people to let me take you away, they would.”

“I imagine so.”

“But I’m not going to do that. You’re responsible for enough stains on my soul already; you aren’t worth another. I suppose this is the part where I tell you all the terrible things I could do to you – and they are very terrible – but I just can’t be bothered.”

“I believe you, Asano. I know a little about the forces with which you seem to be involved, and they’re very intimidating. Why do you think I wanted to kill you? If we meet again, I’m fairly certain that goal will be out of my reach. In fact, you’ll probably be able to kill me out of hand.”

“You may be right. Would you be interested in garnering a little goodwill, for when that day comes?”

“You want something from me.”

“You secured the service of a portal user for your brother. A friend of mine would very much like that name.”

“And if you walk out of this ritual circle with it, it makes you look good in front of all the fancy folk who are oh-so-scared of you right now. Helps buy you the time to grow strong enough that you don’t have to care what they think.”

“Pretty much. But it also signals to them that you’re amenable to working with them. Given the reticence of your brother and his friends, that’s a valuable signal to send.”

Killian and Jason looked at each other in silence for a long time.

“Despite my best efforts, I’ve underestimated how dangerous you are, haven’t I?”

“Yes.”

Killian jerked his head, indicating all the people around them in the warehouse.

“They don’t know that they’ve done the same yet, do they?”

“No.”

“And you need to become stronger before they realise. You aren’t afraid I’ll tell them?”

“You don’t know enough to make more than baseless predictions. They know I’m dangerous enough now that they won’t risk pushing. Not on your word.”

“There are some who would.”

“There always are.”

Killian chuckled.

“Yes, there are. Esteban Galo is the name you are looking for, Mr Asano.”

“Thank you, Mr Laurent. You’ll forgive me if I hope we never see each other again.”

“Mr Asano, you’ll find my hope on that count to have significantly more fervour than yours.”

## Chapter 600

### Dear John

Jason tossed the list of names onto the table in front of him.

“This is what Dawn was up to,” he said as he rubbed his temples. “She could have told me. It’s not like I was doing much more than lounging about recovering.”

He got up and moved out onto the pagoda balcony, leaning on the rail and looking out to sea. In the distance, light was flaring as a magical storm was absorbed by a windmill-like mana accumulator.

Farrah moved to stand next to him.

“She knew she’d have to talk you into it.”

“So she left, knowing I’d go along because she wasn’t here to argue with and I’m sentimental.”

“A mortal failing, she called it.”

“Then I guess I’m not that mortal. We are *not* taking Zara Rimaros as an auxiliary team member. If nothing else, she’s a full-blown adventurer. Auxiliaries are taken for their specialty skills, and her specialty is blowing up a bunch of monsters with typhoon powers.”

Farrah took a recording crystal from her pocket and held it out for him to take. Jason groaned.

“She left a recording crystal with you and bailed again?” he asked. “These are starting to feel like Dear John letters.”

“What’s a Dear John letter?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jason said.

“I’ll give you some privacy to watch it. Just remember that we’re going out to help Autumn find a familiar this afternoon.”

“Yeah.”

Farrah went to the elevating platform and left Jason alone in his suite. He moved inside and a crystal projector formed out of cloud stuff. It was a small plinth, capped by a pyramid, atop which was a slot for a recording crystal. Jason placed the crystal Farrah had given him and then dropped into a sprawl across a couch. A large image of Dawn’s face flickered into place over the projector, making Jason feel like he was looking at a hologram of Emperor Palpatine.

“Sorry for the galactic emperor look,” the projection said. “I was hoping it would make it feel less like a Dear John letter.”

“We could have just had a conversation,” Jason muttered.

"I know we could have just had a conversation," Dawn said, "but conversations with you always go awry from what the other person intends."

"Not always."

"Yes, always."

Jason looked at the projection, affronted. Dawn laughed.

"I wish I could see your face right now. You're not as unpredictable as you think, Jason."

Jason's mouth formed a thin line as he pressed his lips hard together in frustration.

"Yes," Dawn said, "I know you're grouchy that you can't talk back, but that's the point. This isn't a discussion. You're going to sit and listen, get crabby about it, then accept what I've done because I'm not here to argue with and it feels wrong to deny me without having me here to argue with."

"I'm starting to hate this recording."

"I've been discussing with the Adventure Society about this false identity. Since you'll be signing on with your own team as an auxiliary, it will be less obvious if your team takes on multiple auxiliaries at once."

"I know. I've seen the list."

"You're still passive-aggressively having a conversation with a recording aren't you?"

Jason glared at the image.

"But here's the good news," Dawn said. "The list is fake."

"What?"

"I knew you'd get cranky, so I made a list of names that would annoy you, so that you'd be less angry with the real list."

"I wouldn't have to get cranky if you didn't give me a fake list full of people I'd never take. I bet you did this for laughs."

"Also, I thought it would be funny."

"I knew it! You knew you were just... and I'm still talking to a recording."

Dawn's expression softened and the image zoomed out, showing that she was sitting on the grass on a hillside somewhere, in a white summer dress. It was decorated with images of a flower known as phoenix wing.

"This is going to be a new start for you, Jason. You've told me about when you first came to this world and all the promise it held. This is your chance to have that adventuring career you were imagining back then. Maybe not exactly as you imagined it, but I suspect you won't be too unhappy with having a secret identity."

Dawn's image looked regretful, as did Jason's watching it.

"I guess I should give you the real list of names," she said. "Rufus, obviously. He'll fight with you, but strictly speaking, he'll be listed as a trainer. You still have a lot to learn from him, and your friend Taika could benefit from his knowledge as well. Gary is another easy inclusion. Once he finds out that you can just conjure up all the rare materials he could ask for to practise his smithing, I'm certain he'll jump at the chance, even if he can't take his results out of your soul space. Just make sure he does some work where people can use the results, as well. I imagine that diamond-rank mentor of his will turn up regularly to keep him on the right path."

Jason couldn't argue with those picks.

"You should consider Estella Warnock, as well. I think you would be better than me making that approach, but she'll work well with Belinda and she seems a little lost. Also, I know you love her pink hair, so maybe try to hide your celestine fetish at least a little."

"I do not have a... I'm arguing with no one again. Also, I'm lying."

"Yes you do have a fetish," Dawn said. "Stop lying to yourself."

Jason grumbled at the projection.

"Those are the easy picks," Dawn said. "Next come people you aren't so familiar with. There's a man named Amos Pensinata. He's a gold ranker that you've probably heard of. Like you, he's had some experiences with soul trauma that left him with a more capable aura than most. I've convinced him to travel with you for a time and teach you some of the things he's learned about soul manipulation. Some of it will come from his own experiences, while others will be things you would normally learn at or just before gold rank. Fortunately, Mr Pensinata takes a more learn-as-need view."

Jason was familiar with Pensinata by reputation. He was the man who had defeated the same forces that had forced Jason to almost kill himself fleeing in the underwater complex.

"Pensinata has one condition for travelling with you, which is that he brings his nephew with him. The young man has a problem common to adventurers in high-magic zones: he was sheltered through iron and bronze rank and lacks independent experience. Pensinata wishes for his nephew to get some seasoning, away from his overprotective parents."

"He's not going to kidnap his nephew, is he?"

"Carlos Quilido can tell you more about Amos, as they have known each other for a long time."

"That wasn't a no."

“Speaking of which, Quilido is also on the list. Your soul space will be a powerful tool in researching what has been done to the Order of Redeeming Light members. Which means bringing along the captured Order of Redeeming Light members.”

“How many people do you think I can fit in the cloud flask’s vehicle construct?” Jason asked the projection.

“I know that means a lot of people, but you should probably keep the prisoners in your soul space anyway.”

"You can sod that idea right off. I'm not turning my soul into bloody Arkham Asylum."

"I'm assuming," Dawn's recording said, "that you just went on some kind of colourful tirade because apparently, the word 'no' is too efficient for you."

“It lacks emphasis!” Jason yelled at the projection.

“If you really can’t accept the idea, I have already discussed some alternatives – less secure alternatives – with Priest Quilido.”

“Damn right. Carlos can buy a prison bus or something.”

"There is one more person who needs to go along, and this is the one you're not going to like. The Adventure Society wants a representative attached to your team. Something of a personal liaison to you."

“You mean a spy.”

“Yes, basically a spy.”

"Stop predicting what I'm going to say!"

“No.”

“Arrgh!”

Jason watched Dawn’s laughing figure, realising that being there, teasing his future self was possibly the last piece of unadulterated fun she had before heading off into the cosmos on Very Serious Business.

“I don’t know who they’re going to choose for you,” he said, “but I think they know better than to make some foolish choice. They know you’ll flat-out refuse if they don’t find someone acceptable and that pressuring you won’t work. I made sure they at least understood that much.”

“Good,” Jason said.

Dawn’s image took on a sad smile.

“We said our goodbyes in your soul space, so I won’t retread that ground,” she said.

“I hope that when I see you again, you don’t think too poorly of me.”

She made a gesture and the recording ended.

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Jason still hadn't emerged from his suite since Farrah gave him the recording when Liara arrived at the cloud house. Shade led Liara to one of the mezzanine lounges, filled with leafy plants and overlooking the atrium. Although opaque from the outside, the atrium wall rising halfway up the tower was transparent from the inside and let in plenty of natural light. Farrah was waiting for her at a table, drinking a tall glass of iced tea. She poured another for Liara from a pitcher as she gestured for the princess to join her.

"What brings you here?" Farrah asked as Liara sat. "We have an activity soon and are pressed for time."

"Assisting Miss Leal with her familiar ritual, yes. Quite a small-scale activity, given surrounding events."

"We're looking for small, Princess. And we value friendship."

Liara nodded.

"Mr Asano knows about the Adventure Society liaison?" she asked.

"I gave him the message Dawn left behind, but he hasn't emerged since. I don't know what his reaction will be. Dawn tried to manage him as best she could, but there's only so much managing you can do with Jason. And only so much we're willing to. He might need some rough edges shaved off, from time to time, but we're on his side first. Not the Adventure Society's and certainly not your family's."

"I have no qualms with loyalty, Miss Hurin. Loyal people are reliable, and I've found over the decades of my career that consistency is more valuable than capability. If you find someone with both, you treasure them."

"Has the society come up with a liaison they think Jason will accept?"

"I have a name, but whether he'll accept it is still up in the air. But I'm here for another reason. Related to your upcoming activity, in fact."

"Oh?"

"There is a lot of talk related to Jason floating around, but the amount of accurate information varies wildly amongst different circles."

"And?"

"And when information is scarce, people have a habit of taking what they know – or what they've been told, true or not – and adding in their own assumptions to fill in the gaps."

"And then those assumptions ferment into facts in their mind."

"Just so, Miss Hurin."

"And someone has made some assumptions about Jason?"

“There are certain sectors of the adventuring community – the bottom tier guilds and other, less formalised groups – where information about Jason has taken on a certain tone. Some rather drastic assumptions have been made and are threatening to head in a less-than-ideal direction.”

“How so?”

“Information on Jason’s actual combat ability hasn’t spread nearly as far as his name.”

“I see where this is going,” Farrah said. “Someone has convinced themselves that Jason is all reputation and no power, and think that taking him out is their pathway to fame and prestige.”

“More or less.”

“And they know what we’re up to today.”

“Yes.”

“Did you leak it so that these idiots would be coming after us and ruining Autumn’s attempt to find a new familiar?”

“Of course not.”

“You know she lost her familiar defending Rimaros.”

“I do.”

“It’s been traumatic enough for her, without some idiots coming along and ruining what’s already hard enough.”

“I know.”

“Do you, Princess?”

“Miss Hurin, I was in the bowels of that flying city. I had friends and family convince me to let them sacrifice themselves. I would never do what you’re suggesting to someone who made sacrifices for my city and my kingdom.”

“But I’m not talking about you using her as bait. I’m talking about you using Jason as bait, which you’ve done before. Autumn would just be collateral.”

“I didn’t do this, Miss Hurin. It came from some Magic Society source. No conspiracy, just some administrator who saw that Miss Leal had registered she was going to go out and conduct a binding ritual, with a list of who was going to stand watch for her. An opportunist sold some information, we heard about it and I came to warn you.”

A portal opened and Jason stepped out.

“You’re going to do more than warn us, Princess.”