

## Chapter 478

### A Story of War

Jason's barbecue was in full swing, with people crowded along the cliff top and kids splashing in the river, letting it carry them into the magic barrier that stopped them from going over the waterfall and bounced them back. Jason had a steak sandwich in one hand and a drink in a hollowed-out coconut in the other.

"This is nice," Rufus said as he, Jason and Farrah wandered about, meeting the locals. "Tomorrow is the Adventure Society and work, so it's good to relax and go in fresh. It's a monster surge, so things are going to be hectic."

Jason and Farrah, who had been through proto-spaces and monster waves, shared a look. Compared to those, a monster surge was relaxing. The surge was on a much grander scale than the localised events the pair had been through but the individual experience was much less intense.

"I have to say," Jason said, "silver-rank senses are great for cooking. Having enhanced taste really helps get a handle on new ingredients. Speaking of which..."

He waved at a local and wandered over, a woman of around thirty with no magic in her aura.

"Gwendi, you are an absolute princess," Jason said. "That sauce recipe... I have no words."

"Which is quite something, believe me," Rufus added.

"It's always been a favourite," Gwendi said. "Did Mitras and Gelli say hello?"

"I got a wave as they ran for the river," Jason said with a chuckle and Gwendi shook her head.

"No manners, those two. Oh, Jasil and Mr Walsh were looking for you as well."

"I'm sure I'll bump into them," Jason said.

Rufus contemplated Jason as they continued to circulate.

"How do you know so many of these people already?" he asked.

"All this didn't just happen, you know," Jason said, waved his arm broadly at the picnic tables, grills, chairs, kegs of booze and everything else. "You think I had time to do this much cooking? Look at that salad table. Little communities like this; they're great at coming together. Nicest people you'll ever meet."

The afternoon turned to evening with a glorious sunset descending past the western hills. Rather than put out glow stones, Jason conjured his cloak which looked a bit silly over his floral shirt and shorts, even with the hood pushed back. Motes of starlight

emerged from his cloak and drifted over the area, adding to the starlight from the sky overhead.

"Show off," Rufus accused him.

"Every time," Jason told him with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Somewhere along the way, I forgot that magic wasn't all misery, danger and death. It's good to be home."

Jason dodged off to say hello to yet more locals, plastering on a smile as he waved at them. Rufus watched him go with concern.

"How bad was it really?" he asked Farrah softly.

"He wanted to bring his family with him," she said. "They didn't come because they were scared of him."

"Because of the way his abilities are?"

"No. Just make sure Gary doesn't make any jokes about evil powers, alright?"

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Jason immediately got along with the local gold-ranker, Warwick Warnock. Despite having the name of a mid-tier supervillain he was friendly and humble, heavily dialling down his aura so as to not make anyone uncomfortable.

While everyone with an aura followed the etiquette of keeping it restrained, there were different ways of going about it. There were ways of holding back power while still making sure people knew it was there. Warnock, kept his locked away tight, just as Jason had since his efforts at an aura disguise went awry with the Adventure Society official they had met on Jason's yacht.

Jason sensed three more gold-rank auras approaching, one of which belonged to Pelli, the mayor. He quietly vanished into the shadows, leaving his sparkling lights behind and met them before they reached the gathering.

Pelli was walking up the path from town with two more celestines. They both had emerald hair and matching eyes, neither with monster cores evident in their auras. Looking at them, especially the man, Jason noticed a number of incongruities. There was something odd about the way they carried themselves and how their auras were a little too perfect, even for gold rank. It reminded him of Dawn when she was stuck below her actual diamond rank.

His suspicions were all but confirmed when he sensed the slightest whiff of the woman's aura brushing over his own before vanishing from his senses again. It did not reveal a diamond-rank power but he was certain they were reading his aura all but unnoticed, despite his power and control. Jason knew he could not shut out a sufficiently

determined and powerful gold-ranker but he doubted that even the strongest could plumb the depths of his aura unnoticed. That would take a diamond-ranker.

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow, with three hands each holding out a drink for the new visitors.

"Shadow of the Reaper?" the man asked as he took the offered drink.

"Indeed, sir. My name is Shade."

"Are you attached to the Order of the Reaper?"

"Previously, sir. I am satisfied that my service to that organisation has been sufficient and I have quite vehemently moved on."

"They left him in a hole under a lake for half a millennium," Jason said. "As you're no doubt aware, the more politically ambitious faction threw the rest under the bus. Oh, a bus is—"

"I know what a bus is, Mr Asano," the man said. "I should have been more fastidious with my aura and body language, I see."

"I know that story," Jason said. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir, which I can see becoming an unfortunate theme."

Jason then turned to Pelli.

"You do realise that this was meant to be a low-key gathering, Ms Rimaros? Or is it Mrs Rimaros?"

"It is Pelli, thank you, young man. This is Zila and—"

"Soramir," the man said.

"Oh," Jason said, looking at Soramir. One of the things Jason discovered in the last few days was that in the local culture, palindromic first and last names were assigned in adulthood rather than at birth and denoted important members of a given family. It was most common in small families where it might be a prominent adventurer or high-ranking civic official. The more prominent the family, the less common the practice.

"Are you sure you should have told him that?" Pelli asked.

"We've already been careless," Soramir told her, "which has made our intentions and our rudeness plain. We should at least refrain from compounding our discourtesy."

"Mate," Jason said, "the last diamond-ranker I met killed me, so my standards of courtesy operate on bit of a different curve. Also, I've been known to be a bit rude myself, from time to time, so no worries. It's lovely to meet you both. Let's all go take a sausage in the mouth."

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In the dark of night, everyone had gone home. Shade was picking up rubbish while Jason was cleaning the barbecues. Rufus and Farrah had offered to help but Jason told them not to, knowing that he needed to be alone. One of Shade's bodies was holding up a dirty hotplate while Jason applied an alchemical cleanser and started scrubbing.

"Why," he asked the empty air. "I'm just some guy."

"We both know that isn't true," Soramir said, suddenly next to Jason. "I sensed your arrival in this world several days ago. I've seen the things lurking inside you and even I don't know what all of them are. Your familiars alone are terrifying."

Still scrubbing a hotplate, Jason looked sideways at Soramir. The emerald hair and eyes the man had shown at the party had returned to their natural blue.

"I'm no threat to you," Jason said. "I'm no threat to your family. What do you care about me?"

"You're angry."

"OH, YOU THINK?"

Jason snatched the hotplate from Shade and flung it off the cliff. It struck the invisible barrier and bounced back, landing on the grass as Jason wheeled on the diamond-ranker.

"I was meant to be done with high-rankers," he snarled. "You have enough of your own to play with here. Why bother me?"

"My family has done you a disservice, Mr Asano. Brought you into something you neither asked for nor deserve. Because of that, you are a threat to us. Not a grave one, perhaps, but potentially an embarrassing one."

Jason closed his eyes, getting himself under control. For all his rage, his aura hadn't so much as twitched. After it had inadvertently spooked his family, Jason had resolved to never let it out of his control again, whatever his emotional state. Soramir was one of the few that could see right through him, however, seeing the pain and rage burning his insides like a furnace.

"I assume this is something to do with Zara," Jason asked in a calm, soft voice.

"Yes. I would not normally involve myself in the affairs of the family like this but one of our descendants came to us because the family needed to take your measure. This is not such an easy thing to do."

"Take my measure. You mean pry out my secrets."

"I do. I was curious when the person my family wished to investigate was the same one who arrived in this world in such spectacular fashion. You were lucky to land in that storm or I wouldn't have been the only one to take notice."

"That doesn't seem to matter anymore, does it?"

“I suppose not. You were meant to think we were just another pair of gold rankers.”

“Just another pair of gold rankers,” Jason said in a muttered echo, running a hand over his exasperated face before meeting Soramir’s eyes again. “I’m a silver-ranker. Gold rankers shouldn’t know my name, let alone you. How long until one of you kills me in a way that sticks?”

“You’re still here. That says something.”

“I’ve got something to say too, but I won’t. It wouldn’t be diplomatic.”

Jason gestured at Shade, who had retrieved the hotplate, and started cleaning off the dirt it picked up after being thrown.

“I’ve been dead and gone and you aren’t slapping me around,” Jason said, calm once more. “That means whatever problems you’re having aren’t from something I did. What did Zara do, and how bad is this for me?”

“Are you familiar with the practice of political marriage?”

“The basic concept, sure.”

“Zara was matched with a formidable young man from a very powerful and important family. Their union would have created political stability leading into the monster surge which we now face.”

“Made all the worse by the Builder using it to jump in.”

“You jumped in as well.”

“All I’m invading is the local crystal wash supply. I’m not that hard to deal with.”

“Your soul says otherwise, Mr Asano. It tells a story of war.”

Jason washed off the hotplate and set it back onto the barbecue while Shade pulled out the next one.

“So,” Jason said. “What did she do to mess up this marriage arrangement? More importantly, what does that have to do with me?”

“In our culture, it is common to enter a two-year period of formal mourning after the loss of a spouse. Or prospective spouse.”

Jason’s hand stopped scrubbing.

“She didn’t.”

“I’m afraid she did. Too publicly for the family to stop or rescind without making the political mess she made even worse. Which, of course, was her intention.”

“That is not an acceptable thing to do,” Jason said and went back to scrubbing.

“No,” Soramir agreed. “It is not.”

“A little flirting and a plate of gem berry milk nut squares do not constitute a proposal.”

“I’ve seen cultures where that could be argued, but I take your point.”

Jason let out a laugh that sounded like a sob as it trailed off and he hung his head.

"It wasn't meant to be like this," he muttered.

"This is an issue that needs to be resolved," Soramir said. "If we had realised what had happened before you registered with the Adventure Society here, we could have sent you away quietly without anything coming of it."

"You can still do that," Jason said. "You have the power to get me out of here, Adventure Society be damned."

"Your absence is no longer enough. Even gone, it will only be a matter of time before your resurrection is noticed. Trying to cover it up now would only draw attention to it."

"Too many fingers in the Adventure Society pie?"

"Just so."

"What, then?"

"For now, continue as you have been. Be an overlooked adventurer. There is a grace period before you will be discovered by others in which the family will formulate a response. Pelli and Liara Rimaros will be your contact points going forward. The family will likely need your cooperation for whatever comes after."

"And what do I get for my cooperation?"

"I'm certain they can compensate you to your satisfaction."

"I'm not."

"I'm not here to negotiate, Mr Asano."

"Neither am I. I'm here to clean barbecues, so pitch in or sod off."

"This is not going well, is it?"

"I used to be better at hiding my emotions," Jason said. "I guess they used to be smaller. Not that there's any hiding from you."

"What do you want, Mr Asano?"

"You won't send me away?"

"It's too late for that."

"Then bring my team to me. They're in Vitesse. Rufus and Farrah's teammate, too. And Farrah's parents"

"That is manageable, although it will have to be after everything has come out. If you get special treatment before then, your anonymity will not hold. What else?"

"All I want is to meet my friends and be left alone. I don't want anything else from you or your family."