

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.