

Chapter 926

A Big Juicy Hole

Jason entered the room just off the lobby. It was a smaller reception area with just one desk. It was well appointed, rich but tasteful, with dark wood and earthy colours. Another door led deeper into the building. A receptionist sat behind the desk, greeting him with a smile.

She was human and a bronze ranker with no sign of core use, which seemed to be standard for the guild's functionaries. She had the dark skin of a Vitesse native, and long hair tied into thin braids. Her smile was genuine, which Jason found interesting, but realised would be a necessity. Bronze-rankers hiding spite behind a customer service smile would be seen through by the high-rankers they met on a daily basis.

"Good day, sir. You're looking to apply to the guild for membership?"

"I am."

"Please sit."

She tapped a crystal on her desk and a cloud of dust emerged from the floor and coalesced into a chair near Jason. There was a click as the door locked.

"So we won't be disturbed," the receptionist said, seeing Jason glance in that direction. "Please take a seat."

She waited for him to sit before she did the same. The chair wasn't cloud furniture comfortable, but it was close. She took a form from the drawer and a pencil.

"Might I begin with your name, sir?"

"Jason Asano. And yours?"

"It's Monica."

He registered the mild surprise in her aura that didn't make it to her face.

"Do people normally not ask?"

"Not gold rankers, sir."

"You don't need to keep calling me sir."

"Is there a manner in which you would prefer to be addressed?"

"Jason is fine. Mr Asano, if you must."

"Very well, Mr Asano. Speaking of your rank, it means that your application will be assessed by a guild executive, including an in-depth interview. I'll be asking you some preliminary questions to help the process go smoothly. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Does anyone ever say no?"

"You would be surprised, Mr Asano."

“Go ahead and ask; I have nothing to hide. Well, that’s a lie. I have many, many things to hide, but what gold ranker doesn’t? I just don’t think they’ll come up in a guild application unless this guild is involved in some extremely unusual affairs.”

“The guild is definitely involved in some extremely unusual affairs, Mr Asano.”

He laughed and she smiled.

“It’s normal to be nervous, Mr Asano. Applying to any guild on this level is no small thing for anyone. Burning Violet are elite amongst elites.”

“You think I’m nervous? Oh, because of the rambling. No, that’s just me. I always feel that when you’re asking someone to involve themselves with you, it’s only fair to give them a genuine sense of what they’re getting into.”

“That attitude will do you very well when the executive is interviewing you, Mr Asano. Their questions will be rather more probing than mine, and they will be more expectant of thorough answers. I’m just looking for some foundational information. Basic background details, your current adventuring status. You are entirely free to decline answering at this stage and defer your answers to later. I can tell you that openness now will work in your favour with the executive interview.”

“Understood.”

“Let’s start with some background. Your identity will be confirmed later, using your Adventure Society badge.”

“Has anyone actually tried to enter the guild under a false identity?”

“It happens. There was one woman who actually had three different memberships. A shape-shifter, obviously.”

“She was kicked out?”

“No, if you can believe it. She revealed the truth herself and then helped improve the security protocols. That was before my time, though. She ended up teaching at the Remore Academy, which is how I heard about it. I took her Introduction to Improvisational Rituals course. Barely passed, but I loved it. She always had the best stories. She used to be a thief, if you can believe it.”

“Oh, I can believe it.”

“Sorry, I’m getting off track. Lord Bassingthwaite is always criticising me for being too personal, but I think you can be personal and professional at the same time.”

“I completely agree, but I don’t have ‘lord’ at the start of my name.”

“I know, right? That does bring us to the next question, though. Do you hold any royal or noble title, or position within a recognised governmental authority?”

“No. Would that help with my application?”

“Not at all. It can even be an impediment in some cases. Nobility and sovereignty often involve complications the guild would prefer to avoid.”

“I’ve noticed those complications myself, from time to time.”

“Oh, I bet you have. Gold rankers have the best stories, but most don’t give a bronze ranker a second glance, you know? If you don’t mind me saying, Mr Asano, you are a very approachable man.”

She made a circular gesture in his direction.

“You’ve got, I don’t know, kind of a weird presence. Most gold rankers are all imposing, but you have that tamped right down. It’s there, in the background, but there’s something casual and inviting about you. Are you doing that with your aura on purpose?”

“I like to be friendly with people.”

“Well, I appreciate it. I would never normally be this open with the people who come in here...”

Jason sensed a lie in her aura for the first time.

“...but sitting across from you is like having tea with a friend.”

“I appreciate you saying that, Monica. Perhaps, though, we should move on to the next question.”

“Oh, you’re right. I get to chatting, then some silver ranker gets held up waiting and he thinks he’s all important because his dad’s friend’s uncle killed a dragon once. He throws a fit, and then who ends up getting an earful from Lord Bassingthwaite? Me, that’s who.”

“Then, maybe we try and avoid that?”

“Well, I could hide, but I work here. He’d find me eventually.”

“Uh, I was more thinking that getting through those questions might be a better approach than hide and seek with your boss.”

“That does make sense. Keep it practical.”

She looked down at her form.

“Right, we’re up to... species. You appear human, but not of an ethnicity I recognise, and I can’t read it from your aura. Again, I will remind you that you can decline to answer any of these questions, although they will be asked again, later in the process.”

“Then I might exercise my right to decline. I will say that I was born human, but the adventuring life found me, rather than the other way around. There’s quite a story to it.”

“Oh, I bet there is. You’re sure you can’t... no, we need to get through this. Do you mind answering where you’re from originally?”

“A little town you won’t have heard of, called Casselton Beach. Lovely beaches, as you’d expect from the name. No adventurers, very low magic levels. I did my training in Greenstone, though.”

“Oh, wow. The shape-shifter lady I told you about is from there. The one whose course I took in—”

“I remember, yes.”

“The magic there is so low, but the Geller-Remore facility they built has produced some exceptional adventurers over the last decade. I applied to the program there myself, while I was at the Remore Academy.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. Intensive program, independent monster hunting. Getting a slot is really competitive.”

“Like joining this guild.”

“Exactly! You know, the Gellers train their best prospects down there in Greenstone.”

“So I’ve heard. About those questions—”

“Did you train at the Geller-Remore facility? I haven’t heard about any of the graduates reaching gold rank yet.”

“It was just after my time. They were just starting some pilot programs at the end of my time in Greenstone. I was actually part of the very first course on aura control.”

“Oh, that must have been amazing. Did you get to meet any of the famous Gellers?”

“I did, as it happens.”

“You know, most of the Gellers operating out of Vitesse are members of the guild here.”

“I was told that, yes.”

“Do you think any of them would remember you?” she asked, then leaned forward conspiratorially. “I’m not being strictly professional by telling you this...”

Jason awkwardly cleared his throat.

“...but if they did remember you, that would give a nice bump to your chances of being accepted.”

“I think some of them might recall me,” Jason said. “Do you need to write that down, or do we just move on to the next question?”

“We cover that at the end, so we can keep going,” she said and checked her form again. “I mentioned that we’d do the bits about your connections and associates later, and that’s now. I don’t see the point of some of these questions, if I’m being honest, but they make us do the whole form. As if anyone would admit to being in a cult or trafficking

restricted essences. Anyway, are you currently or have you previously been a member of any magic, adventuring or craft related guilds, societies or associations?"

"Just the Adventure Society. Standard membership."

"Star rating?"

"That's... less standard."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Having one star at gold rank is more common than people think, and certainly not a disqualifying factor. Burning Violet is exclusive, but it's also really big. You don't have to be some tricky politician or expert ritualist. They need some good head-breakers just like everyone else. Look, so long as you can assure us of your good standing with the Adventure Society, we can leave the details of your ranking to the later interview with the executive. No one is going to make an issue of it until they do the full identity check, before the interview."

"That's probably for the best, thank you. Why don't they check identity until that late in the process?"

"It's part of the protocols. If we catch people too early, they haven't done anything shonky enough, we have to just kick them out. Once they've been properly shady, though, we can take them out back and deal with them ourselves. They call it the 'enough rope' protocol."

"I do have connections within other groups and associations, I should perhaps point out. No memberships with any of them."

"That's fine. It would be a little strange if you reach gold rank without making connections. If you don't mind me asking, if you got to gold rank without ever joining a guild, why now?"

"I have friends in the Burning Violet guild. The rest of my team, in fact. I've wanted to come to Vitesse for a very long time, but circumstances have always conspired to keep me away. Now, I'm finally here."

"Oh, I know a big juicy hole where a story goes when I hear one. You couldn't get here in all the years it took to get to gold rank?"

Jason let out a chuckle.

"I will confess that the story might have a little juice."

"Aah, you're not going to tell me, are you?"

"We do need to avoid you getting yelled at by Lord Bassingthwaite."

"He doesn't yell. He does that 'I'm not mad, I'm disappointed' thing. He's actually a pretty good boss, all said and done. But yeah, we're almost done."

She read directly from the form.

“Have you ever, at any stage, faced reprimand from the Adventure Society, Magic Society, any government authority or church over your association with...”

She looked up from the form.

“Look, have you ever got caught doing bad stuff with bad people?”

“I did get demoted once, at iron rank. There was a corruption enquiry at the Greenstone branch and they blanket demoted everyone at two or three stars at the beginning of the investigation. They bumped people back up afterwards.”

“Oh, that doesn’t count. Those isolated branches always go dirty and need a clean out every few years. My friend Denise works for the Adventure Society and got roped into a Continental Council. She had to live on this archipelago in the middle of nowhere for half a year.”

She looked down at the form.

“Okay, the rest is basically just a list of known associates. It’s not a dealbreaker, unless your mum is a rival guild master or in the Red Table or something. Really, this is a chance to list any existing guild members you know, or can get away with saying you kind of know, like the Gellers we were talking about. You said your team were all in the guild, right?”

“I did.”

“Well, that about as close to a guarantee as you’ll get, so let’s start there. What’s your team name?”

Monica was looking down at the form, her pencil poised to write down names. When Jason told her the name of her team, she froze. Then, moving like the first thaw of spring, her head rose to stare at him.

“Did you just say—”

“You sent a gold ranker to Monica without checking who they were?” A voice boomed through the door that led further into the building. “Do you have any idea who is in the city this week?”

The door was flung open, revealing a harried man with a coal black face and snow-white beard. He was one of the older-looking gold rankers Jason had seen, and would have passed for being in his sixties on Earth.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” he said, stepping forward. Jason rose from his chair to shake the offered hand.

“Not at all,” Jason said. “Monica has been excellent. A consummate professional.”

The man threw a suspicious glance at Monica, still staring bug-eyed at Jason, before turning back to Jason as well.

“My name is Neiman Bassingthwaite, and I’m the chief membership officer here at the guild. May I ask your name?”

“Jason Asano.”

The hand holding Jason’s went dead still.

“The, ah, Jason Asano who... did all of the things?”

“Yep.”

“Well, it’s an honour to meet you sir. We were wondering if you were going to call by, but were expecting something more of an entourage.”

“I was hoping to take care of things quietly.”

“Yes, well that was never going to happen, I’m afraid, through no fault of your own. You and I should have a chat.”