

Chapter 606

That Boy In the Tent

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I suppose we have.”

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

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

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

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

“Ours is not to question the gods.”

"Ours might not be, but mine is."

"You're casual with blasphemy."

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

"Your home is a little intimidating."

"Only from the outside."

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

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

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

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

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

"What is this place?"

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

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

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

She looked at Jason.

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

The amusement dropped from Jason's expression.

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

"I remember."

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

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

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

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

“We’ll see.”

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

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

“What’s that for?”

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

“Sliding down from the upper levels.”

“You have a problem with elevating platforms?”

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

“You can call me Zara.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zara looked at Jason for a moment before speaking.

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

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

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

Jason narrowed his eyes as he looked at Zara.

"What we—"

He held up a hand to cut her off.

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

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

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

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

A smile crept onto Jason's face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zara smiled in awkward embarrassment.

"Sorry."

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

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

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

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

He turned around.

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

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

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

He grinned.

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

He trailed off with an awkward wince.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mistakes are how we grow.”

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

“Ah.”

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

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

"I thought mistakes were how we grow."

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

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

Zara stood up.

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

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

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

Jason blinked his surprise, then grinned.

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

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

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

"Why? What's wrong with it?"