

Chapter 516

What It Sent Us

Happy with his service to date, Soramir had Trenchant Moore assigned full-time to assist Liara and himself. While Trench could and would also assist Vesper, she remained a silver ranker and could not be given authority over a gold, even if she was a princess and he a royal guard. It was part of the complex hierarchical interplay between the royal family and their guard force of elite adventurers.

In the office he had been assigned, Moore was going over the reports of Asano's expedition. The expedition leader who made the report was unclear on how Asano turned the Builder's forces against themselves, while being very clear on the inadequacy of Asano's explanation.

"What does 'gots to get funky' mean?" he murmured to himself as he read.

It was yet another mystery surrounding the man. His connection to the diamond-ranker that even Soramir was deferential to was still unknown, as was his repeated returns from the grave, according to the church of Death. Soramir had told him it had something to do with a rival entity to the Builder and the unusual nature of the current monster surge. Their current best guess was that it was related to Asano's original world, which had been how someone of such low rank had been caught up in cosmic events.

Soramir had postulated that Asano had been caught up in events from the moment he arrived in their world the first time. Trenchant didn't envy Asano becoming entangled in the agenda of such powerful forces before he was even an iron ranker. Fighting through death over and over, facing down beings from beyond reality. And that was ignoring the relatively normal messes that surrounded him as an adventurer and an outworlder. He could see how someone wouldn't find a gold-ranker intimidating after all that, and even become quite unhinged.

It was clear that Asano had been profoundly affected by the forces pressuring him. Trenchant was still a little unnerved by Asano's cloud house. It reminded him of a still lake with a monster slumbering somewhere in the depths. He had no reason to feel that way yet he became more certain the more he thought about it.

Asano's aura was monstrous and Trenchant knew full well the kind of suffering it took to do that to a soul, as well as the time and struggle to recover from it. He was curious as to what his friend Amos would make of Asano, and he would find out soon enough. Trenchant had been directed, once Asano's team was registered for local activity, to deliver the team an invitation to a social event.

The idea of having a ball amidst a monster surge did not sit well with Trenchant but he understood the necessity. The wealthy and noble houses of Rimaros were an intricately threaded tapestry on which the Storm Kingdom rested. There could be no worse time for that tapestry to fray or develop holes.

There was also a more personal element to it that left Trenchant uncertain. Farrah Hurin was a fierce, passionate and courageous woman he had found immediately compelling, although there were many reasons not to pursue it. Her connection to Asano was certainly one and she had her own mysteries. She was also young, which would not matter at silver rank if she was forty or fifty, but she was twenty-seven. Twenty-six, discounting the year she had been dead, which would put her at less than a quarter of Trenchant's own age.

"You're aura is a little turbulent, Commander Moore."

Trenchant Moore's senses were sharp and his aura control was impeccable. It was not enough to prevent Soramir from seeing through him, however, or from entering his office unnoticed.

"I've been dwelling on Asano's cloud house," Trenchant said. He had been dealing with people stronger than him for decades and was an old hand at not revealing everything, even when his aura was being read. He knew well that saying true things was not the same as speaking the truth.

"Asano's cloud house is a curiosity," Soramir said. "If I hadn't seen its connection to him in his aura, I would have believed it belonged to someone else."

"Why?"

"Commander Moore, you have already encountered something similar, many times. The comparison has simply not occurred to you because it's a little outrageous."

"What do you mean?"

"How often do you think my senses encounter a location into which they are utterly unable to penetrate?"

"Very rarely. My understanding is that even the defences of the royal sky island are unable to block your perception."

"On the contrary, Commander, it is something my senses pass over every day, as do yours. Our city has many of them. Every major city does."

Trenchant frowned as his mind ticked over. What could shut out a perception as powerful as...

"Temples," he realised.

"Exactly," Soramir said. "The innermost thresholds of temples – their most sacred locations – are impervious to my senses. And I can tell that the rest could be as well, if the forces behind those temples wished it, but they do not obstruct their visitors. Only the most sacred locations are completely hidden away."

"You're saying Asano's cloud house is a temple?"

"The way it blocks senses is the same."

"You think his cloud house is empowered by this great astral being? The World-Phoenix?"

"It was my first thought, but I dismissed it immediately. I've seen the depths of Asano's soul reflected in his aura. While I don't understand or recognise everything I saw inside it, he could not hide anything from me. If there was a star seed of the World-Phoenix inside Asano, I would have seen it. In fact, he cannot be implanted with a star seed at all."

"Because he is a gestalt being, Trenchant surmised.

"You noticed."

"I have encountered a true messenger in the past, not just a summon. I know the feeling of an aura that feels almost physically substantial because the soul that projecting it is."

"Where did you encounter a true messenger?" Soramir asked.

"Heartsilver Mountain."

"Ah. You're a survivor of the Celestial Sword."

"Yes, sir."

Soramir paused to look over Trenchant with freshly assessing eyes.

"What are you doing, serving my family, Trenchant Moore?"

"My duty, sir. As my family has done since you founded this kingdom."

"Since the beginning? I'm sorry, Commander Moore, but I don't remember your ancestor."

"We were only a minor family in your service, Ancestral Majesty."

"But a loyal one, it would seem."

"We do our best. If this World-Phoenix is not responsible for the properties of Asano's cloud house, what is?"

"That is what troubles me," Soramir said. "I can't examine the cloud house, but I tell from Asano that it truly is bonded to him. Since he is not a vessel for the World-Phoenix's power, that means Asano himself is responsible."

"Unless it is a property of the house and not Asano."

"It is not. I contacted the woman who crafted it and she confirmed that the original item was an ordinary device, - if you can say that about any cloud flask. There is nothing you could feed it that would produce this effect except, perhaps, at diamond rank. She was certain that any effect on that level has to come from the person bonded to it and would require a deeper bond that was ordinary for the item."

"Then, either Asano or this great astral being has modified it, but the properties it exhibits somehow come from Asano."

"As I said, I have observed the depths of his aura thoroughly enough to examine his soul. He has magical bonds with some of his items, but also with some things not with him. I could not determine what, but I think that is where the secret lies."

"And what course of action will you be taking?" Trenchant asked.

Soramir didn't answer immediately, taking a piece of fruit from the dimensional pouch at his waist and biting into it. Trenchant waited for Soramir to unhurriedly chew and swallow.

"I've known from the beginning that Asano was unusual," Soramir eventually said. "The way he arrived in the Storm Kingdom made that clear enough. I was already investigating him when Liara and Vesper came looking for a diamond-ranker to examine his aura. I decided to take a closer look and test how strong his senses were. He sensed me much earlier than I anticipated."

"You did reveal yourself on purpose, then?"

"Yes. From everything I've managed to learn about Asano, he needs to be handled delicately. Too many mysteries and powerful forces orbit around him. The day will come when he is no longer outmatched by those forces and I don't want the Storm Kingdom to be on the list of his enemies due a reckoning when he hits gold and diamond."

"You think he will?"

"Oh, yes. There are two kinds of adventurers, Commander Moore. You are the first type: reliable, efficient and supremely capable. You advanced because of the way you conduct yourself. You are the kind of adventurer that everyone wants to work with. Asano is the other kind. Wild, erratic, improvisational. These are not the people you want to work with, but they are the ones who become legends. Usually by repeatedly surviving the kind of challenges that adventurers like you avoided in the first place."

"You think he'll reach diamond. If he lives long enough."

"Which is why I want to establish good relations now, but that's tricky with a man like him. He is highly averse to any kind of institutional power, so impressing him with our authority doesn't help. Nor can we be generous and accommodating because he wouldn't

trust it. Vesper is excellent because her hostility meets his expectations and I can stop her from going too far. Ironically, the pathway to the trust of a man like Jason Asano is to be self-serving, because it's what he expects. So long as we make the deal clear, he'll work with us."

"I've never cared for mind games of this kind," Trenchant said.

"Fortunately, that is not your role," Soramir told him. "You're our good example. A man of integrity outside of our political plots and schemes. Asano will respect that."

"Is this all really necessary just for some political problems with the Irios family?"

"That is important, but no. Asano's importance is unclear to me, but I don't think it lies with the Builder and what comes after. Not any more than tangentially, at least. The World-Phoenix wouldn't send us a silver-ranker to fight the Builder and what comes after."

"After?"

"The church of Knowledge has been building up fighting forces around the globe. Slowly but steadily, over the last fifteen years or so."

"The church of Knowledge? Why a military force?"

"The thing about the goddess of Knowledge," Soramir said, "is that she always knows something that you don't. The other churches weren't going to sit by while a bunch of librarians established a large military force. War and his subordinate gods have established response forces in those same regions, in anticipation of what Knowledge is up to."

"And what is she up to?"

"No one knows, for certain," Soramir said. "Not even the church of Knowledge's own people. But now we have a suspicion about the church of Purity and more grand summonings. Wouldn't it be a funny thing if all these messengers popped out to find the holy warriors of Knowledge, War, Soldier, Champion and Warrior all waiting for them, all over the world?"

"Wouldn't the Purity adherents move once they knew the churches were in the vicinity?"

"Some of the infrastructure in place that fuelled the one summoning we've seen was built into that dam at the time of its construction. This has been planned for a very long time and these undertakings are massive and not easily shifted. Doing so unnoticed would be impossible."

"Do you have any idea of Asano's role in all this?" Trenchant asked.

"I believe the Purity church is out there, preparing a messenger invasion to follow up once the Builder calls its forces back to the astral, at the end of the monster surge. The

summoning event we've seen was premature and halted, but what if it wasn't? What if those things could just keep coming through? What we will need is someone to shut the gate, and the World-Phoenix is the one in charge of closing that kind of gate. And what it sent us was Jason Asano."

Jason didn't end up being the one who took Travis to see the church of Knowledge. Farrah volunteered for that role while Jason led his team to the Adventure Society to register locally for monster surge duty. Neil and Belinda grumbled about going back to work the day after they arrived but Humphrey gave a speech about not shirking and the need to learn how to work together all over again until Neil got up and set out just so Humphrey would stop talking.

The Adventure Society administration building didn't have people lined up outside the doors this time but was still incredibly busy. They were forced into one of several queues inching towards the front. Finally, they reached the front where the reception staff were rushing people through as quickly as they could. The functionary they met at the front of the queue quickly scribbled down their details, a pencil in one hand and a large stamp in the other.

"Does your team have an operational name?" she asked.

"Team Biscuit!" Humphrey said cheerfully.

"No!" Another Humphrey said as he grabbed the moustachioed first one by the collar. The first Humphrey turned into a puppy dangling from the scruff of its neck, adorably waving helpless paws.

"That's not our team name," Humphrey told the functionary.

"Paperwork's been stamped, so it is now," she said, handing him the document.

"Maybe next time get your familiar under control. Now, please clear the line. You can take this to the jobs hall."

A dismayed Humphrey looked at the documentation in one hand and the puppy in the other as he let Jason push him out of the way.

Chapter 517

I Am Not Jason Asano

Jason and his team arrived back at the cloud house, exhausted in ways no stamina potion could fix after two weeks on the road. There were some kinds of tired only rest could fix, however potent your potion supply was. The monster surge was now in full swing, with monsters spawning faster than even the most pessimistic predictions had anticipated.

The abnormal rate of magical manifestations was not restricted to monsters, with a commensurate increase in the appearance of essences and awakening stones. This included a strangely high number of the ordinarily scarce dimension essence. One of the most valuable and sought-after essences in existence, for those that found them it was a massive jackpot.

At Humphrey's suggestion, Jason's team had done the same thing they had done after the first time they completed their roster, back in Greenstone. They volunteered to take a road contract as a shakedown cruise to help the team re-establish their teamwork. They had been operating separately for years, ranking up from bronze rank to silver in that time. Their operational dynamic would need to be rebuilt from the ground up.

Road contracts weren't usually something that happened in the Storm Kingdom. In low-magic regions like Greenstone, towns and villages had noticeboards where locals posted monster sightings for passing adventurers to deal with, only sending word directly to the Adventure Society when the threat level to civilians was high. A high-magic zone like Rimaros had a magical detection system that identified monster manifestations and allowed the closest Adventure Society office to mount a response.

From a practical perspective, it was similar to the grid on Earth, although it was very different magically. The Earth grid was a unified system operating over every landmass on the planet, with minimal energy and maintenance requirements. Earth's grid was less complex, yet its functionality was so much greater, which had staggered Farrah with the nuanced grasp of magic it implied.

Jason had gone to Liara with his proposed road contract and they negotiated the details. It used a supply contract, like the one Jason had already undertaken, as the basis. The team had moved between fortress towns and Fertility church agriculture towers, delivering supplies. The difference had been that they also took the time to thin out the increasing accumulation of monsters around fortress towns in the outlying regions.

After a good night's sleep, Humphrey had the team going over the extensive notes he had taken during the trip, hammering at their flaws and highlighting potential tactics and strategies for their current ability suites. With the intensity of the monster surge, it was like being back in the Order of the Reaper's astral space where they had spent half a year slogging through monsters.

Only Jason had been through anything like that intensity in the years since, with even the diligent Humphrey showing his weariness. Despite a few bantering gripes, however, the team had all actively participated in getting themselves back on track. They had each had chances to see proper guild teams in action and knew they had a lot of catching up to do, especially given the nature of their team.

Their team operated on a strategic doctrine starkly opposed to the Rimaros approach of specialisation and maximising effectiveness, where the core objective was to turn any situation into a best-case scenario for themselves. Jason's team was all about versatility and adaptation; about finding success in the worst-case scenario. They'd seen the pointy end of enough sticks to know that, sooner or later, they'd be seeing more.

Jason had recently watched a guild team in action, smoothly annihilating monsters with a speed and efficiency that his team would never equal, even at their best. But his team had no interest in being the best at normal. When adequate would get the job done, they were satisfied with adequate.

What mattered were the days when everything went wrong. When they were stranded in the dark, surrounded by enemies and with no one to rely on but each other. The days with no second chances, where they had to find a way, whatever it took. Those were the days when they needed to be the best.

After a full morning of strategising, the team went out onto the deck where Taika had set out a smorgasbord lunch on a picnic table. It was made up of Jason's cooking experiments with local ingredients that hadn't gone horribly wrong.

"Bro, I need something to do. Farrah and Travis have been cloistered away for weeks and you all ran off. Gary and Rufus have been helping me train when they aren't on mission but I'm spending most of my time sitting around the house."

"You're bronze-rank," Humphrey told him. "Without guild backing or at least a team around you, you're basically a civilian."

"I did help fight some of the monsters here on the island, at least," Taika said. "Most of the ones that spawned are too strong, though." "I can sometimes take on a silver-rank one, but not two, let alone ten."

“Yep, that sucks,” Neil mumbled around a mouthful of cheese enchilada. “You know, I did miss meal times from when we were back in Greenstone. This tortilla is amazing.”

“They have a tropical crop here they turn into a weirdly fantastic flour,” Jason said. “It’s not even magical.”

“Tastes magical,” Neil said happily.

Shade rose up from Jason’s shadow.

“Mr Asano, a message arrived from the Adventure Society while you were in your strategy session. They would like your team to attend a meeting this afternoon to discuss several topics.”

“Any sense if it’s a good thing or a bad thing?” Jason asked.

“Princess Liara and Princess Vesper will both be in attendance.”

“So, bad then,” Jason said.

Vesper and Liara walked together through the halls of the Adventure Society complex, talking within the confines of a privacy screen.

“You shouldn’t have let them run off for two weeks,” Vesper said. “We missed the best window to introduce Jason to society in the wake of the expedition with the Builder and his team arriving with a diamond-ranker.”

“Asano has been separated from his team for years. I don’t know what he’s been through in the intervening years, but his Ancestral Majesty has intimated that it was extreme. I know you’re happy with how the expedition you went on turned out but you can’t argue that his behaviour on it was stable. A support network can bring him that, and maybe make him feel less like we’re the enemy.”

“I know,” Vesper grumbled. “I just don’t like missing a prime opportunity.”

“You’re not seriously going to tell me you have no way to stoke the smouldering embers?”

“Of course I do. Jacinda Irios has been looking to meet with the boy, after that run-in I engineered with Kasper. I will say this for Asano: while he is a pain to work with, he does have a knack for stirring up the right kind of trouble.”

Jason and his team filed into a meeting room within the Adventure Society administration complex, shown the way by a society functionary. The princesses were yet to arrive so Belinda conjured a deck of cards and started playing with Sophie and Neil at one end of the conference table. Humphrey and Jason went to the other end, Humphrey

sitting with good posture while Jason kicked back. Clive didn't sit at all, moving to examine the wall panel with an embedded crystal that activated the room's privacy screen.

Rather than one of the conference room's chairs, Jason was in a comfortable cloud chair. Now that his full item set was back in his possession, he was able to use the various set abilities again. For the cloud flask, this meant simple cloud constructs that could serve as a shield or a platform for movement but mostly ended up being chairs, hammocks and, in one case, a mud toboggan.

Jason looked over at Stash, sprawled in Sophie's lap in puppy form getting his tummy scratched.

"Stash doesn't seem to have changed from ranking up as much as I would have thought," Jason said to Humphrey.

"Oh, he's changed," Humphrey said. "He's a lot smarter, for one thing."

"I don't really see it," Jason said.

"That's because he's smart enough to know that if he keeps looking like a puppy and acting like an infant he can get away with a lot more."

"Is this still about the team name?" Jason asked. "Humphrey, it's fine. Everyone, tell Humphrey it's fine. Again."

"Yep," Belinda said, not looking up from her hand of cards.

"I don't care," Clive said as he peered into the now open wall panel, prodding the hole behind it with a crystal rod.

"I gave up on any appearance of dignity the moment I joined a team with Jason in it," Neil said.

"Hurtful, but thanks, I guess," Jason said.

"Not a problem," Neil said. "I'm happy to tell that to as many people as you like."

He glowered at the cards in his hand.

"Belinda, have you been rigging the deck again?"

"Don't blame your terrible luck on me," she told him.

"But it is a matter of dignity," Humphrey insisted to Jason. "It's how we present ourselves to the world. We can't change the name until the monster surge is done and administration reopens non-essential services. By that point, it's how we'll be known, for good or ill."

"Look at it this way, Humphrey," Jason said. "If we have a name like this, then the respect we get will be respect we've earned in spite of it. Unless you'd prefer our respect come from what we tell people about us instead of what we do as a team. You don't want our accomplishments to be superficial braggadocio do you?"

Humphrey groaned as he shook his head.

“I’d forgotten what it was like, talking to you.”

“It’s a treat, I know,” Jason said brightly.

Clive closed the wall panel and joined the others at the table shortly before Vesper and Liara arrived, Trenchant Moore with them. Liara and Trenchant sat down opposite Jason, Humphrey and Clive while Vesper moved to the control panel to activate the privacy screen. Neil, Sophie and Belinda moved up the table to sit with the others.

“There was a problem with the privacy screen,” Clive told Vesper, “so I took the liberty of fixing it. It seems like someone had tapped into it so that anything that went on in the room while the privacy screen was active would be recorded and sent to a remote location. Obviously, doing that without notifying all attendees of an official meeting in a privacy-secured Adventure Society meeting room is a breach of Adventure Society protocols.”

“It is?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Humphrey said, eyes locked on Vesper. She, in turn, was frowning at Clive.

“Thank you,” she told him flatly.

“You’re welcome,” Clive said.

“Naturally,” Jason added, “we’ll be reporting the issue to the Adventure Society administration. They’ll need to do a sweep through all the conference rooms and make sure it isn’t a widespread problem. Can’t be too careful in these uncertain times.”

“You needn’t bother yourselves,” Vesper said through a jaw-clenched smile. “I’ll take care of that.”

“Oh, no bother,” Jason said. “I can assure you we’ll take genuine delight in—”

“Jason,” Humphrey chided. “Don’t play with your food.”

“Sorry, boss,” Jason said.

“Princess Vesper,” Humphrey said. “My friend takes a perverse pleasure in political games but I do not. I am a straightforward man, so if you are straightforward with us, we will reciprocate. Won’t we, Jason?”

“If we have to,” Jason grumbled. Humphrey gave him a sharp look.

“Fine,” Jason said. “I’ll be good.”

“You can choose to go in another direction,” Humphrey told the princesses, turning back to face them. “You can bring us into an ostensibly private meeting and record us. You can send us on missions without telling us that we’re bait. You can play games but, as I said, I don’t like games. I’ll step away and you can go back to dealing with Jason, so if you’ve enjoyed doing so thus far, I’d appreciate you telling us now and saving me the time.”

“If I'm being honest, Mr Geller, dealing with either of you feels very similar,” Vesper said. “You both seem quite imperious when speaking to royalty.”

“It's not Mr Geller, Princess Vesper,” Humphrey said. “It's Young Master Geller. I understand that my aristocratic lineage, being from a provincial, low-magic city-state, is inconsequential to a princess from Rimaros. But while my friend doesn't care if you call him Mr Asano, Jason or Susan the flower girl, I take pride in my name and my house. Unless you wish to forgo formal decorum, I will thank you to respect them both.”

At Humphrey's use of the term 'formal decorum,' Liara and Vesper both flicked their eyes over Jason, lounging in a cloud chair with his feet up on a cloud footstool. Humphrey showed no indication of having noticed either their gazes or the incongruity of making his assertions made while sitting next to Jason's aggressive casualness.

Neither princess would be foolish enough to dismiss a Geller as inconsequential. Like the non-aristocratic Remore family, the source of their prestige was not their name but their generations of accomplishment. Both families had been offered prestigious titles over the centuries by powerful rulers, and all had been refused. The Gellers kept only their humble title linked to their original rise to prominence, while the Remores carried no title at all.

“I'm sorry if you feel that we've been hostile,” Liara said. “Our goal has always been to work with Mr Asano, not to treat him as an enemy.”

“Lady that's a hard sell when he had to all but kill himself so you'd step in after dangling him on a hook while you fished for cultists,” Sophie said.

“Is it true that you didn't know what fishing was?” Belinda asked Neil.

“I know what fishing is!”

“Gary said you didn't.”

“Of course I know what fishing is. I just don't see the point of catching them one at a time with a string on a stick when you have fishing trawlers and magic explosions.”

“The point of going fishing isn't to catch fish,” Clive said.

“Why do people keep saying that?” Neil asked. “That sentence is insane.”

Liara and Vesper watched Humphrey, waiting for him to bring his unruly team into line. Instead, he sat patiently, watching the reactions of the two princesses.

“I thought you didn't like games, Young Master Geller,” Vesper told him.

“You do the best with what you have, Princess Vesper. What I have is my team and I don't like the way you've been treating one of its members.”

“We aren't looking to exploit anyone,” Liara said. “We want two things from Mr Asano. One is to help us with a local political problem in which Mr Asano has become

unfortunately involved. That is our fault and we are happy to compensate him for his assistance, starting with helping to reunite your team.”

“Which we are grateful for,” Humphrey acknowledged.

“Even if it was mostly Dawn,” Sophie muttered. Humphrey gave her a side glance and she leaned back, looking innocent.

“That is Vesper’s area,” Liara continued. “She represents the royal family in this. I am a member of the royal family but I represent the Adventure Society here. The society offers Mr Asano nothing beyond rewards commensurate to his efforts, as is true of any adventurer. He’s a member of the Adventure Society and has a responsibility to step forward and do what he can. We will assign him to tasks as a member of the Adventure Society as best fits our needs. The only reason he merits special attention is his connection to the Builder cult, which is my particular area of authority.”

Humphrey turned to Jason, who nodded. He then turned back to the princesses.

“We recognise that we are just one of many teams during an unprecedented event in the Adventure Society’s history,” Humphrey said. “Unfortunately, circumstances have not allowed us to be treated as such. Modesty aside, we are special, which you obviously are aware of due to the special treatment we’ve been given. I understand that there is a disparity between our rank and the importance that has been placed on us. All we ask is to be treated with respect.”

Vesper looked like she’d swallowed a peach pit but Liara put a restraining hand on her forearm. Vesper nodded, pausing before speaking in a controlled voice.

“Young Master Geller, one of the reasons we have called your team in here is the contract you just completed. The contract Princess Liara personally intervened with the Adventure Society to have you assigned. If you do not see a gold-rank princess who is also a high-ranking Adventure Society official allowing your team to hand-craft your own contract in the middle of the most potent monster surge in history during one and possibly two interdimensional invasions as a gesture of respect, I think we may have reached a point where our perspectives have irreconcilably diverged.”

“She’s not wrong,” Jason said, sitting up as his cloud chair remoulded under him.

“We do appreciate that,” Humphrey said. “And we are here to do what the Adventure Society requires of us. Your political agenda is inextricably entangled in that intention, however.”

“That is the unfortunate reality,” Liara acknowledged.

“We are not trying to be hostile either,” Humphrey continued, then turned to give Sophie a pointed look as she leaned forward to chime in. She leaned back again, giving him an unrepentant shrug.

“My priority is to protect my team,” Humphrey continued. “I do wish to approach our interactions with respect and in good faith. That said, I will be unambiguous about placing my team’s welfare – in every respect – over the political needs of your family. I recognise that those political needs have wider implications, but I am not Jason Asano. As long as I have known him, he has been concerned for the people affected by the decisions of the powerful and I have no doubt he agreed to help you for that reason. I, on the other hand, was raised to believe that those of us born to power have a duty to wield it responsibly. It should not fall on the head of my friend to protect the people under the rule of your royal family.”

Humphrey had been controlled for most of the meeting but there was fire in his eyes and his words as his force of will was palpable.

“You think it’s that simple?” Vesper shot back, unshaken.

“Yes,” Humphrey said, his voice cold as he locked away his anger. “But as my mother likes to say, simple is not the same thing as easy. My goal is to be clear on where each of us stands, so we can all move forward constructively.”

“I agree that’s best,” Liara said. “Perhaps, having established that, we can move on to the first topic for which this meeting was called?”

“Of course,” Humphrey said, his voice more diplomatically neutral. “We aren’t trying to be difficult.”

Vesper looked at him incredulously while he maintained a straight face.

Liara ignored them both as she took a file from a dimensional bag and placed it on the table.

“The first thing we want to talk about is the contract you just completed. The Adventure Society is very happy with how it went.”

“Really?” Jason asked, leaning forward. “I don’t hear that a lot.”

“Imagine my surprise,” Vesper said.

Chapter 518

That Powerful and That Old

Liara, Vesper and the thus-far silent Trenchant Moore were sitting across from Jason and his team in an Adventure Society conference room. Liara tapped a folder on the table in front of her.

“The reason the society gave me so much leeway with the contract you all just completed was that it was part of a wider test program. This monster surge is unlike anything that has come before. You're all aware of the specifics, so I won't waste time repeating what you already know. The Adventure Society had been trying out new approaches to handle new problems. One of those problems is the safety of the more remote fortress towns. They've been exposed and under-supplied to a greater degree than anticipated.”

“Our contract was a test for a potential response?” Humphrey asked.

“Exactly,” Liara said. “The Adventure Society is increasing the resource allocation to the outlying regions but things are tight on every front. Our use of those resources needs to be as efficient as possible. The idea is to take some of the less-critical guild teams and the more capable independent teams and send them out on similar contracts. Some were already sent out before you even returned, and the early results are very positive. More reliable supply routes. Fortress towns burning through fewer resources with their active defences. We've even managed to take out a few Purity adherents, although we've lost people to them as well.”

“We didn't encounter any during our contract,” Jason said. “To be honest, I'm a little disappointed. You weren't following me again were you, Liara?”

“I was not. You have your team, now.”

“This is all very gratifying,” Humphrey said, “but I don't think you called us in here to tell us we did a good job.”

“Your team is unusual,” Liara said. “Multiple portal or teleport powers, plus multiple, personal storage spaces. We want you to specialise in this kind of contract. We want to deploy you all over the Storm Kingdom so you have as many portal destinations as possible. Not only will this allow you to provide emergency supplies when regular supply runs fall short but you will be available for rapid-response to Builder activity. Given your aptitude in this area, Mr Asano, we want you at the forefront. Your team also has more experience than most at facing the Builder and winning.”

“We are at the disposal of the Adventure Society,” Humphrey said.

“Good,” Liara said. “This leaves us with the other topic for today’s meeting.”

She leaned back in her chair, looking to Vesper at her side.

“The political aspect,” Vesper said. “I’m sure you’ve explained everything to your team so, instead of rehashing details, I’ll move directly on to what comes next. Despite everything going on, social gatherings continue to be a part of Rimaros high society. These are not just indulgences of the privileged but important events that allow the powerful players of the kingdom to settle high-level affairs.”

“And you need me to parade around,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Vesper said. “The real power brokers won’t be taken in by our little charade, but the families to which they belong are the tools they use for negotiation. And to the noble houses, leverage and reputation is everything. The games must be played in the front rooms so the work can be done in the back. If the Irios family looks too weak, they have to divert resources from what they should be doing to protect themselves. I don’t have to explain why that is undesirable, especially now.”

“Can’t they just ignore the people nipping at their heels until the monster surge is over?” Neil asked.

“No,” Jason said. “If they get attacked and refuse to defend themselves, things just get worse faster.”

Vesper nodded at Jason appreciatively.

“Just so,” she said. “If they do not stand up for themselves, their detractors would only become emboldened and push harder and my family can only go so far to protect them. My family rule this kingdom, but we do not rule alone. The aristocratic houses form a delicate balance of forces that need to be managed. If we show too much favouritism, even now, it weakens us, which weakens the kingdom.”

“You don’t need to sell me on the reasons, Princess Vesper,” Jason said. “I told you I’m in and I rarely make an alliance specifically to murder all the people in it.”

“I wanted to get you in front of people following the expedition we went on together, but you’ve been away. We’re going to make it happen before you head out on another contract, and we need to get you ready for that. Etiquette. Dancing, general decorum. I have no doubt that you’ll go ahead and break the rules, but you should at least take the time to learn them first.”

“So, you and I will be spending some time together,” Jason said.

“There is still a monster surge happening,” Humphrey said. “I don’t want this taking too much time away from our Adventure Society duties.”

“Which is why we are starting right now,” Vesper said. “You need to come with me, Mr Asano.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Vesper closed her eyes as she pressed her lips thinly together, managing to hold back a response. She got up, turned off the privacy screen and left. Jason waggled his eyebrows at his team as he got up and followed her out.

“She really doesn’t like him,” Neil said.

“Yep,” Belinda agreed.

“Think they’re going to...?”

“Definitely,” Belinda said. “They’re going to break a bed. Maybe even a wall.”

“That is a princess of the realm,” Humphrey admonished. “At least do her the respect of voicing those opinions behind closed doors.”

He turned to Liara and the still-silent Trenchant Moore.

“I apologise for the lack of decorum on the part of my team members,” he said.

“They’re mostly thieves and hooligans.”

The Purity enclave was underground in a cave system filled with luminescent crystals with a subterranean river. It had long ago been worked from natural stone into a temple and dormitory, in preparation for the days now at hand.

The Purity church’s Order of Redeeming Light had been making preparations in the Storm Kingdom for many years. When other wings of the church had grown impatient and revealed their hands early, it had brought about the public downfall of the church. Only the most diligent orders within the church, with the stomach for patience and the faith for obedience were left to carry out the mission that would turn recent history on its head and bring purification to the world.

For some orders, their task was to bring forth an army of pure beings to cleanse the filth from the world. The Order of Redeeming Light had another purpose. Theirs was to take that which was unclean and purify it, forging weapons redeemed from an unclean world.

Melody Jain was the leader of the enclave and her second in command, Sendira, was midway through reporting what their scouts had discovered. The order was largely comprised of holy warriors, but they also had a priest to serve as advisor and connection to the god. Their priest was a human named Laront, who was as young as his handsome face suggested, his silver rank not yet needed to stave off the ageing process.

“The Adventure Society is increasing their activity in the outlying reaches. They know we are out here and that we are acting. We should prepare to move before they understand why.”

Melody nodded.

“Agreed. Make preparations, but we must choose our moment well. Something is coming from the north that will draw all the attention away from us.”

“May I ask what is coming?”

“Our Lord has warned me of the unclean ally moving one of his great forces south,” the priest said. “The Storm Kingdom has angered it and it wished to make an example.”

“That is when we make our move,” Melody said.

“And what of Asano? Do we still need to capture him before we kill him for the ally?”

“No,” Melody said. “I wanted him captured so I could use him to lure my daughter here. Our informants in Rimaros have told us that she is here. Now, we can be reunited and she can be cleansed.”

“And if she is unwilling?”

“It does not matter,” Melody said. “I was unwilling, yet now I am pure. She can be forgiven her ignorance, once we have burned it out of her. I was once forced to leave my child behind and now my family shall be reunited.”

Liara and Trenchant were making their way back to the royal sky island, sitting opposite one another in a flying carriage.

“I’m concerned about Vesper,” Liara said. “She is being far too easily riled by Asano and his companions. They have the passion of youth but they’re children. She shouldn’t be letting them throw her off balance and I’m unsure why she is.”

“Her highness, Princess Vesper, has always held more administrative ambitions,” Trenchant explained. “Her adventuring has always been sporadic, only undertaken to advance her rank. It was never a calling. Monster surges are normally quiet, politically, so these have been the times she most actively pursues advancement.”

“You’re suggesting she’s upset because the politics is keeping her from going out and ranking up?”

“No,” Trenchant said. “My point is that Vesper is not like you and I. Her world is a political one where appearance is substance and trust goes only as far as mutual interest. When she adventured, her teams were fleeting and assembled from those whose ambitions were not centred on the mission. She has never experienced a team whose camaraderie was forged in fire, the ways ours were.”

“The way Asano’s was,” Liara said.

“Yes,” Trenchant said. “Asano’s aura may be a closed book to us, but you felt the others. You sensed the bond they have. The trust that comes from pulling each other back from the bloody edge. Not just them, either.”

“Farrah Hurin.”

“I don’t know everything they have been through,” Trenchant said, “but it gave her the passion and the loyalty to march into a royal palace to tear strips off a diamond-ranker. It’s brash and foolish, but also formidable.”

“You admire them.”

“Yes. I am a weapon of politicians but I do not care for politics. It is far too often the enemy of integrity. Asano and his team are young and foolish but they are adventurers to the bone. Vesper knows that. Her silver rank isn’t enough to read their auras but she’s felt the loyalty they have. The willingness to go all the way to the wall for someone doesn’t fit her world of compromise and benefits and it unnerves her.”

“Why?”

“Because she instinctively understands that they are willing to go further than she is. They flaunt it because they understand that Asano is not stable right now and are very protective of him. There is something inherently intimidating about absolute commitment. It’s part of what makes zealots such troubling enemies.”

“And politicians always leave room for compromise and always leave a way out.”

“I have seen exceptions, but they didn’t tend to be all that successful as politicians. To an adventurer, absolute commitment to your team is a strength. To a politician, that rigidity is a weakness. But Vesper is being forced to accept Asano and his people on their terms. This is not a good situation for her.”

“Asano is not an enemy we want in the future,” Liara said. “Antagonising him now is not good for us.”

“No, but we must also look to the needs of today, which is where Vesper excels. Unfortunately, she is being told no at every turn. The other major problem she faces is that she’s been instructed to play her own game, but by someone else’s rules.”

“How so?”

“Out of Asano’s circle, only Humphrey Geller and Rufus Remore are people she should even be aware of. Even then, only peripherally. They’re a group of silver-rankers, far from home and the central bases of their power. Yet they are moving in circles with gold and diamond-rankers. Higher still, if you consider some of what we’ve only surmised about Asano and Farrah Hurin. The hierarchy of rank is a central pillar of political

interaction, yet Asano disregards it entirely. More importantly, his Ancestral Majesty supports him in this."

"I never really thought about that," Liara said. "I've mostly been dealing with him from an Adventure Society perspective, which Asano seems to respect. The political side is very different."

"Asano is clearly used to dealing with authorities more powerful than himself. He doesn't like how that has gone in the past and has resolved to not let himself be pushed down. This conflicts with Vesper both directly and ideologically, yet his Ancestral Majesty's wishes force her to capitulate to Asano and his erratic whims. In some ways, your ancestor is using Princess Vesper as a tool more than he is Asano. When you are that powerful and that old, perhaps that is how you come to see the people around you."

"What should I do about Vesper?"

"Support her," Trenchant advised. "Make sure she understands that she isn't isolated and there are people on her side. Otherwise, she'll end up like Asano: brittle, sharp and lashing out at any hand reaching out to her."

In the outer reaches of Rimaros, the windmill-like storm accumulators drained magic from the Sea of Storm's eponymous weather events to both shield the city and help power its infrastructure. A small flying vessel passed over the line of accumulators on its passage towards the city. It had the signature industrial iron look of the Builder's vessels and was being escorted by Zila Rimaros. Soramir Rimaros has sensed their approach and rapidly arrived to intercept, arriving on a floating cloud that sparkled with gold and silver light.

"What is this?" he asked of Zila.

"It emerged from the underwater city while I was monitoring it and approached me," Zila said. "Nothing onboard is stronger than silver-rank. It poses no threat."

Their powerful senses could easily penetrate the vessel, which was crewed by constructs. Only one living thing was aboard; a silver-rank cultist.

"He's claimed peaceful passage as an envoy to the Storm Kingdom," Zila said. "He wishes to speak with someone who can represent the Storm Kingdom."

"You were not enough?"

"I thought it would be best to defer to you, in this."

"And what does he want? What does the Builder want?"

The cultist emerged onto the deck wearing plain, hooded grey robes. It held no fear, even in the face of diamond-rankers. They could sense not just a willingness, but an expectation of death.

"I am a herald of war," he said. "I come with a message. A declaration."

"Let us hear it, then," Soramir told him.

"Your kingdom was offered escape from my master's intentions, and you rejected his goodwill. As a result, your kingdom will pay the price. He is no longer just coming for your astral spaces. He shall despoil your lands and massacre your people. He is the Builder, but all your works shall be unmade, Soramir Rimaros. Everything you have built shall be rendered unto dust."

"Is that it? Soramir asked. "That's the whole message?"

"It is. You may kill me now, for my task is done."

"Why bother. Go back and tell your master he could have just sent a note."

Soramir turned around and shot back toward the city.

Chapter 519

One Battle at a Time

Jason took the sound recording crystal out of the projector, stopping the music. He then returned the projector to his inventory. Vesper stood on the other side of the large, wooden-floored room, looking slightly flushed. She stood with her back to him, looking out the window. They were in the lower-security area of the royal palace, close to the arrival lake, where minor affairs and less prominent guests were hosted.

“You can dance, I’ll give you that,” she said.

“I did tell you I’ve got the moves.”

“That thing you did, leading me with your aura. I’ve never seen aura control used like that.”

Jason walked across the room to stand next to her and looked out at the water. Boats shrouded in air bubbles were regularly surfacing, having risen to the sky island from the sea below.

“The trick is that it’s not just the aura,” he said. “It’s the music and how you lead with the body. Bring it all together and you can teach your partner a dance when they are already dancing it.”

“It’s delicate. Impressive.”

“That may be the first nice thing you’ve said about me.”

“I don’t hate you, Mr Asano. I hate the trouble you bring.”

Jason gave her a flat look.

“I know,” she said, not meeting his gaze. “We were the ones who brought you into this. But trouble clings to you like cat fur to a coat. You can’t deny that.”

“I’ve denied the Builder, Princess. I can deny you. Also, what do you know about coats? Who has a coat in the tropics?”

“Where did you learn to do that with your aura?” she asked, ignoring his question.

“As you’re aware, my aura is a little outside of the ordinary. I occasionally take the time to stop and rebuild my control techniques from the ground up, and one of those times I swapped aura control tips with a vampire.”

“A vampire?”

“His name’s Craig. He’s a friend.”

“Vampires should be killed on sight.”

“Not every vampire is a monster. Not in my world, anyway. Perhaps it’s the low magic that dampens their hunger and balances their minds, I don’t know.”

“Leaving vampires unchecked will cause grave problems down the line.”

“Oh, I’m aware. My friends from home brought word that as soon as I left, the vampires started a war.”

“Why would they wait until you leave?”

“Because people from my world have learned what it is to be my enemy, Princess.”

“This is not your world, Mr Asano.”

“I know. But my enemies here will learn too.”

She heard flint in his voice, reminding her of the cold, hard adventurer he had been on their expedition together. No one on their side had actually seen him fight, but the enemy survivors had been terrified of him. The Magic Society was still unsure what Jason had done to the member of their group who was still unconscious, weeks later. The church of the Healer said it was some kind of soul trauma and was sending a specialist. Anything that could be learned about how star seeds worked was a potential asset against the Builder.

Vesper took a note from her pocket and handed it to Jason.

“Go to that shop and buy the listed skill books,” she told him. “Once you’ve used them, we’ll go from there. Don’t just blindly think that what you learn from a skill book will be enough. I’ll work with you to integrate that knowledge. Make it your own.”

“I’m familiar with the process. It would be a little odd if I got to silver-rank without using my skill-book ability.”

“Using it and using it well are very different things.”

“True enough,” Jason acknowledged, tucking the note into his inventory. “Who am I going to run into this time? Another Irios? Some jealous admirer of Zara’s? The king?”

“I’ve already used that brush, Mr Asano. A good artist is versatile.”

“Fair enough.”

Jason was about to leave when a system box popped up in front of him.

-
- Contact [Claire Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Rick Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Hannah Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Dustin Kettering] has entered communication range.
-

Jason immediately sent a voice chat request.

-
- You have entered a voice chat with [Rick Geller].
-

“Jason?” Rick’s voice appeared in Jason’s head.

"G'day Rick," Jason responded mentally. "What are you doing in town?"

"What are you doing alive?"

"It turns out death isn't for me. I gave it a couple of goes; did my due diligence, but nah. It turns out that coming back from the dead is kind of my thing."

"Sounds like you haven't changed."

"You might be surprised," Jason said.

"Really? If you're not standing next to some absurdly gorgeous woman right now, I might believe it."

Jason looked at Vesper, who was watching him and had realised something was happening.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Jason said.

"No? Cassandra Mercer? That silver-haired indenture? The damn Hurricane Princess? Is she why you're in Rimaros?"

"Definitely not," Jason said. "I arrived here when the monster surge started, that's all. I'm just a no-name adventurer."

"Where are you right now?" Rick asked.

"The royal palace."

"Of course you are."

"I assume you are too, since my chat isn't blocked."

"Just got here. I have to deliver an important report, but meet up after?"

"Absolutely. I'm here with a princess, so she can probably help me track you down."

"Oh, come on, Jason."

"I've told you before Rick: what I have can't be taught."

Jason and Vesper were walking down a long hallway. It was filled with portraits of men and women looking stern and regal, all with blue hair and the same circlet of gold set with a large sapphire. At the end of the hallway, it opened into a waiting room outside of some large impressive doors. The line of portraits ended opposite the doors with a picture of Soramir.

There was a palace official present, acting as escort for Rick Geller and his team, most of whom Jason had trained with in Greenstone. Aside from Rick, there were the elven sisters, Hannah and Claire. Dustin Kettering was a friend of Neil's, from their time suffering together in Thadwick Mercer's team. There was someone he didn't recognise with them; a woman of the runic people with their iconic dark skin lit up with glowing, tattoo-like sigils.

“Jason,” Rick hissed. “What are you doing here?”

At the same time, the palace official was bowing to Vesper.

“Your Highness,” he greeted.

“G’day Rick. Ladies. Dustin. This is Vesper; she’s a local tour guide.”

The palace official flashed an unhappy expression at Jason but it smoothed as Vesper made a subtle, restraining gesture. Before anyone else could speak the doors were opened from the other side by another official.

“Princess Vesper, Richard Geller and Jason Asano. Please enter and stand before the king.”

The rest of Rick’s team stayed behind with the official that had already been with them as Vesper led Jason and Rick in following the official into the palace throne room. It was large and long, with a central carpet of rich blue running down to a raised throne. The ceiling was a massive skylight made up of irregular glass fragments, as if they’d been shattered. Each was tinted in shades of blue that varied ever so slightly from fragment to fragment. The result was that the room felt like it was underwater, washed in shifting blues. Jason craned his neck like a tourist, not hiding the degree to which he was impressed.

The vast chamber was all the more cavernous for only having a few people in it as the official led them towards the throne at the far end. Sitting on it was a man with blue hair wearing the simple gold circlet from all the portraits outside. Flanking him to one side was Soramir and the other was Zila Rimaros. Dawn was also present, standing off to the side from the throne.

When they reached the end of the hall, the official bowed and left via a discreet side door. Vesper and Rick both kneeled as the Storm King looked sternly at Jason.

“So,” he said. “You’re Asano.”

“And your Zara’s dad. G’day, Your Kingness.”

Next to Jason, Rick made a muffled noise. Soramir took on a wry smile while Dawn shook her head.

“Is it true that you once gave the Mirror King a speech on why you wouldn’t kneel?” the Storm King asked.

“I wouldn’t call it a speech,” Jason said. “We were just chatting. I have some strong feelings on mandatory demonstrations of respect.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“That being said, I’ll take a scuffed knee over a slit throat, so if you’re going to have me executed if I don’t kneel, I’d appreciate you letting me know so I can get to it.”

"I think we both know that moment has passed, Mr Asano. What will you do if I decide to have you executed for your insolence?"

"Die on my feet. I've done it before."

"But can you again? Word is, you're all out of resurrections."

"You're listening to the Builder, now? That's not what I'd call a reputable source, Your Majesty."

The king stood up, took the three steps down from the throne and moved to stand in front of Jason. He was much taller, looking down as they met eye to eye.

"I can see why my daughter picked you," he said. "She has a penchant for reckless choices, and I imagine reckless choices would be the theme of your epitaph, if you'd ever stay dead."

"She picked me because I had the convenient double feature of being dead and on the far side of the world."

"My daughter might make a hash of the big choices, Mr Asano, but she's very good about the little ones. As you might expect, I had you looked into very thoroughly after she made her little mess."

"And?"

"And you've been running around acting like a gold-ranker since you were iron. I'd wonder how you survived like that, but you didn't, did you? Why not act with a little decorum when meeting me?"

"Because you told me not to."

"Did I?"

"You can fit a lot of people in this room, but the only ones here are friends and family, and some of those friends are mine. You don't have Dawn in this room if you're genuinely looking for trouble. You chose intimate and wanted to see if I'd notice because you're looking to take my measure. Plus, you're Zara's father."

"That girl never does the things I tell her."

"No, Your Majesty," Jason said. "But I'll bet she does the things you do."

The king chuckled.

"You know, Soramir wants me to marry one of our impressive young women off to you."

"I guessed as much. How do you feel about that?"

"That remains to be seen. Do you think you're worthy of them?"

"No. But worthy isn't what I'm looking for in a relationship."

"And what are you looking for?"

“Nothing. I need to work on myself for a while.”

The king nodded.

“I have to say, Mr Asano, you’re exactly what I expected.”

Jason blinked in surprise.

“I don’t think anyone has ever said that to me before.”

The king chuckled again as he turned and wandered out of Jason’s personal space.

“Vesper, Young Master Geller, please rise.”

The people next to Jason got to their feet. Vesper was shooting daggers at Jason from the corner of her eye while Rick glanced at him with a familiar mix of apprehension and disbelief. The king turned back to the three with a warm expression.

“Vesper, we’ve had you doing a difficult job with difficult people under difficult circumstances. We’re very happy with the results, thus far. Please continue knowing that you have our full confidence.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“And you, Young Master Geller. You’re a friend of Mr Asano?”

“We did some training together, Your Majesty.”

“And how was that?”

Rick looked unsure of himself for a moment before answering.

“Horrible, Your Majesty.”

The king chuckled.

“Alright,” he said. “That’s enough fun for me. Now there is the unfortunate matter at hand. You have a report to make, Young Master Geller.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Then you have the floor.”

Rick nodded, pulling a crystal recording projector from his dimensional satchel. He set it on the floor, inserted a crystal and an image was projected into the room. At first, all it showed was a massive cloud of dust, moving through the desert. Based on the size of the visible landmarks, it was the size of a sandstorm. After a short time, something moved out of the dust, although it took time as the great moving thing threw up more dust as it went. Slowly they made out a shape so large it occupied the vast majority of the dust cloud.

“Are those buildings?” Zila asked. “This is one of the Builder’s dimensional cities?”

“It is,” Rick said. “This one is a ground city, but it moves. There appear to be thousands of thick legs underneath that move it forward along with some kind of traction system. You should have received reports when it started moving south several weeks ago.”

“We did,” Soramir said. Rick looked at him, his face seeming familiar, although he couldn’t sense an aura from the man. Then he realised he’s seen his face outside the throne room, in the very first portrait. Soramir had a wry smile at Rick’s expression.

“Please continue, young man.”

Rick nodded.

“My team was one of many assigned as outriding scouts, maintaining a distant perimeter as the city moved south. It went through the arid lands and the Arkivahl Desert, which are sparsely populated. The City of Glass was thankfully not in its path. As it neared the coast and Storm Kingdom’s northern border, there were two cities in its path. Small ones, but heavily populated. Especially during a surge. Forces were mobilised to attack the city, but the attack failed. The city has two diamond-rank essence users and some kind of diamond rank flesh abomination. I haven’t seen it, but reports describe it as a dragon of flesh and steel. Not a match for a diamond-rank essence user, but a highly destructive threat.”

“What happened to the cities?” Jason asked.

“They have already fallen,” the king said, his earlier joviality gone. “We received word several days ago.”

“The assessment,” Rick said, “is that between the defences built into the city and its defenders, a minimum of four diamond-rankers will be required to successfully attack it. Five or more would be better.”

“We have one more diamond-ranker,” Zila said. “He is currently monitoring the underwater city already here in the kingdom, which is also on the move. We can only assume that it presents a level of danger equivalent to what was just described to us. The two cities are converging on the northern reaches of the kingdom. There are two more cities in the kingdom with diamond-rankers we can call on. That will be five. Enough for one city. Maybe.”

“I don’t imagine that the Builder will be so kind as to leave us to one battle at a time,” the King said.

Soramir looked at Jason, then followed Jason’s gaze to Dawn, standing unobtrusively back from the others. She looked back at Jason.

“No,” she told him.

Chapter 520

No One Telling Me I Can't

Jason and Dawn walked towards each other until they were face to face.

"No," she repeated.

"Dawn."

"I said no."

"Yeah," Jason said softly. "You did."

She wheeled around, turning her back on him as she ran a frustrated hand over her face. The rest of the room's occupants looked on in confused silence, aside from Soramir. He was looking at them with narrowed eyes.

"Why do you have to be like this?" Dawn asked, her back still to Jason. "Time and again, why are you so eager to make the sacrifice?"

"You know me," Jason said, the habitual amusement in his voice a transparent veneer over his sober undertone. "Hero complex."

"How many times were you the one to step out on Earth when the factions were squabbling over meaningless scraps like scavengers?"

"You stepped out with me. You, me and Farrah."

"And look at what it did to you. You're a vase smashed and put back together so many times you're more glue than pottery."

"That's a little hurtful."

She turned back around to face him.

"Why do you always have to make things so difficult?" she asked.

"I'm a delight to work with."

"When I first tried to work with you, you killed me."

"It was one time."

"You looted my corpse."

"I was meant to pass that up? You're a diamond-ranker. That made me rich."

"You're an idiot," she said.

"That's not news to anyone. If I were smarter, I wouldn't be the one standing here. It took me way too many stupid choices to get this far. Why stop now?"

The Storm King cleared his throat.

"Perhaps one of you would care to enlighten the rest of us as to what you are discussing."

“Your ancestor should have figured most of it out,” Jason said, not taking his eyes from Dawn. “Why don’t you go ahead and explain, Soramir.”

“The Hierophant is allowed to intervene in our world a single time,” Soramir said. “Even if we call in aid, we can, at most, eliminate a single one of the two cities bearing down on our kingdom. I believe Mr Asano wants her to use her one intervention to deal with the other city.”

“Is that even possible for one person?” The King asked.

“If she is the person,” Soramir said, “Then I believe so.”

The King turned to Dawn.

“Lady Hierophant. What would it take for such a feat to be even possible?”

Dawn turned her gaze on the king.

“No one telling me I can’t.”

She turned back to Jason as the others exchanged uncertain looks, except for Soramir and the king. Soramir revealed nothing on his expression, while the king had just caught a dose of Dawn’s aura and was looking shell-shocked.

“Uh... may I say something?” Rick said in the pause.

“Go ahead, Rick,” Jason said.

“The two diamond-rankers from the northern continent who were part of the failed attack on the rolling city are still trailing it with the outrider teams. I don’t want to speak for diamond rankers but it seems likely they’ll help.”

“That would make seven,” Zila said. “Perhaps that would be enough to handle one city and then the other.”

“It won’t be,” Dawn said.

“May I ask a question?” Vesper said.

“I think any perspective is valuable right now,” Soramir said. “Please go ahead, Vesper.”

“Lady Hierophant,” Vesper said. “Why are you talking like Jason is the one who gets to choose if you act? Why were we summoned to attend this briefing?”

“Because I did not come to this world to help protect it from the Builder,” Dawn said. “Warning the Adventure Society and the governments was my personal decision, but you have the strength to fight for yourselves. I was sent here to see that Jason Asano completes the task for which he returned to this world.”

“Just to be clear,” Jason said. “I was coming back anyway.”

“Jason is not important to your world,” Dawn said. “He was important in that he helped trigger the long-delayed monster surge, but that is done. What he needs to do now

is for another world, not this one. I was sent to make sure that task was carried out, which cannot be done until the monster surge is over.”

“What I have to do doesn’t matter,” Jason said, forestalling questions.

“The point,” Dawn said, “is that my intervention needs to be used to keep Jason alive.”

“And you claim this task is worth leaving my kingdom to fall?” The Storm King asked.

“Yes,” Dawn said. “Your kingdom has many people, but if Asano fails, his entire world dies.

“I’m still unsure as to why Asano gets to choose whether you help us or not,” Vesper said. “Aren’t you in control of your own intervention?”

“Jason cannot control my intervention,” Dawn said. “What he does know is that if he runs off and attacks one of these cities, I will go and pull him out. And since I am intervening anyway, there is no reason to use anything but my full measure of power.”

“Like holding himself hostage?” Rick asked.

“But that only works so long as he’s willing to make a suicide rush at one of these cities with complete commitment,” Vesper said. “Why would he do that? What would it get him?”

“It gets me acting to assist the Storm Kingdom,” Dawn said.

“You’re saying,” Vesper said, “that he will go that far just to force your hand into helping us when it gets him nothing and costs him what has to be his strongest asset in this world. I ask again: why?”

“What kind of question is that?” Jason asked. “We’re talking about a kingdom full of people. Maybe you can do some evacuating, but it’s the people with power that’ll escape the Builder’s forces moving in. The others will all get left behind. It’s not heroic to give up a safety net if it can help millions of people. It’s the bare minimum you can do and still be a person.”

“I cannot stop Jason and take him far from here without intervening,” Dawn said. “Your family could, but why would they? He’s trying to save your kingdom. His ability to force my hand is why it is effectively his choice as to whether or not I intervene. All I can do is try and convince him to take his allies and leave.”

She turned her gaze back on Jason.

“Which he will not. He is stubbornly human for an outworlder. Again and again, I have watched him sacrifice for those who turned around and treated him poorly. Exploited him. And he kept doing it, even when it made his own family fear what it turned him into. That is

how far he will go to secure my assistance for you, for no more reason than you need him to."

"They get it, Dawn. I have a hero complex."

"I'm asking you to walk away, Jason. You would risk billions of people and a world full of life arguably more deserving of help than the human race for one kingdom."

"Dawn, why ask when you already know the answer?"

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps in the hope that all you've been through is finally enough. Perhaps because I like knowing that it never will be. You don't have a hero complex, Jason. You are—"

"Don't say it," Jason told her. "I'll blush."

"Are you truly going to claim that a being of your resources, power and knowledge cannot find a way to stop this man?" Zila asked Dawn.

"Of course she can," Jason said. "She just won't."

"Why not?" Soramir asked.

"Because the World-Phoenix sent me in person to watch over Jason because it wanted me to connect with the mortality I had long drifted away from. At first, I thought that meant embracing the small moments and simple pleasures. I became a painter again, as I had been in my youth. But I could have learned that anywhere. It was the stubborn foolishness of a mortal that kept letting the world burn his hands as he pulled it from the fire that she wanted me to see."

Dawn turned to the other silver-rankers.

"Jason is a fool. A mad idiot who makes one terrible choice after another. But sometimes we need the passion of young fools. They will make the choices that the sensible and wise will not. They challenge the impossible. That is why the World-Phoenix sent me to Jason Asano."

"Okay, now I am blushing, I can feel it."

Dawn laughed.

"I'm trying to make a speech here," she told him.

"And it's very nice," Jason said. "Very flattering. And I know that we just had this big conversation about me getting my selfish way and pushing you into helping out, but maybe there's a way to even the odds without forcing you to step up."

"And what's that?" the Storm King asked.

"Does this world have some kind of magic plutonium?" Jason asked. "Because I know a guy."

Rimarus was mobilising on an unprecedented scale, the Magic Society, Adventure Society and government working in conjunction to muster all the available forces. Only the minimal force required to defend the city would be left in place. With most adventurers from silver-rank up preparing to move out in a fleet of airships and through a cornucopia of portals.

The Storm King and Soramir, who had been trying to shape the chaos from an administrative hub within the palace, finally stepping through a door to a private balcony during a lull for a break.

“Thank you for your guidance, Ancestor,” the Storm King said after activating the balcony’s privacy screen.

“What for?” Soramir asked.

“I was reluctant to take such a casual approach to Asano but you talked me into it. Now he had swayed this mysterious Hierophant to our aid. What is a hierophant, anyway?”

“A hierophant is someone like me, and one day, you,” Soramir said. “She once held a position of great power that she has passed along, although her position was far more than the king of an ordinary physical realm. Hierophant, for me, is a description. For her, it is a title.”

“Her aid may be all that holds this kingdom together, and it hinged on a boy. If you hadn’t advised me on how to approach him...”

The king trailed off, shaking his head.

“That was not to sway him, descendant. He was always going to help us, however we treated him. As the Hierophant said, it is simply who he is. I wanted to show him our goodwill. And, if all works out, we must show him our gratitude. At this point, any fool can see his friendship will be a treasure in the decades and centuries to come.”

“If the Hierophant saves the kingdom, I’ll shower them both in glory. And if she is right about the Builder’s intentions, she will.”

“Asano has had his fill of fame and found the taste bitter. You need to hide his involvement, descendant.”

“People will know.”

“And they will know you want them to keep their mouths shut. The combination will afford him as much privacy and protection as we can offer.”

“I defer to your wisdom, Ancestor. We should not be thinking ahead right now, however. I do not like our allocation of resources, putting out weakest bet where we can least afford to lose.”

“I share your concerns, but to do it any other way would tip our hand.”

Soramir turned off the privacy screen.

"That is as much break as we can afford," he said. "I'll assist you as long as I can with the administrative tasks before I need to deploy."

"Thank you, ancestor."

In the largest Artifice Association workshop in Rimaros, resources were being brought in by a train of couriers with dimensional space powers. Travis was at a drafting desk, madly drawing out designs with input from Clive, Gary and the Knowledge priestess, Gabrielle.

Travis had a profound grasp of the weapon he was designing and had no trouble recalling the details. One of his essence abilities was specialised in constructing and modifying design models in his mind. Like holographic recordings only he could see without Jason's Party interface. Jason had commented that it was the closest he had seen to the images projected by his own interface ability.

Travis' knowledge fell short in two areas, which was where Clive, Gary and Gabrielle came in. The first area was with the tools he had to work with. Magitech weapons were technological as well as magical, which artificer workshops were not equipped to handle.

Gary was an artificer and, while he specialised in weapons and armour, he was well versed in all the tools of his trade. Travis explained what he needed to the others, Clive helping decipher that into magical terms. Gary's role was to determine what was possible with the tools at hand and where they would need to adapt the design.

In addition to not knowing the tools at his disposal, Travis' other shortfall was his ignorance of the materials he had to work with. Gabrielle's contribution was in determining appropriate materials. As priests and priestesses of Knowledge were wont to do, she had simply turned up where she was needed and got to work. Gabrielle was able to tell him what local resources he could use as elements of the rapidly forming design were completed. Those were the materials being brought in, ready for assembly to begin.

"And you're certain this is alright?" Clive asked Gabrielle, not for the first time. "It seems like we're wading into a lot of grey areas in terms of what your goddess would generally allow."

"The highest transcendent beings all operate in balance," Gabrielle explained. "The goddess of Death and the Reaper, for example, each have their areas of authority and they work with an ebb and flow. The builder had come to our world and has been pushing the boundaries of the agreements it agreed to abide by. This gives the gods of our world

an amount of leeway to push their own boundaries in reaction. The time has come for the Builder to pay for his recklessness.”

“I hate that I’m not a part of this,” Jason said. He was on the balcony of his cloud house, feeling at a loss. Compared to the chaos taking place in Livaros, sleepy Arnote was quiet and tranquil. This was especially true looking out over the placid, turquoise lagoon.

“You have pushed me more than a little today,” Dawn told him. “This is what I ask in return. If you participate in this operation, the Builder has an open invitation to use any of his assembled forces to come after you. People are going to die today, Jason. A lot of people. There are diamond-rank hornets in that nest, Jason. Don’t poke it.”