

Chapter 599

A Lesson of Days Gone

In the aftermath of the fighting, a small army of gold and silver rankers were sweeping the area for escape tunnels, traps and anyone who had managed to hide away. The adventurers were a combined force of the Sapphire Crown guild, who served the royal family, and Amouz family members. The Amouz family had volunteered in numbers that surprised even Liara, whose husband was born into it.

Killian Laurent had taken the place of Havi Estos in being chained to a thick metal pole with a suppression collar around his neck. Even more precautions had been added, in the form of a layered ritual array sufficiently complex that Clive, Belinda and Farrah were both studying it enthusiastically. The gold-rank ritualist who had put it in place was looking harried as they peppered him with questions.

Sound could not pass through the edge of the ritual circle, which was currently empty save for Killian. Just outside it, Liara and Jason were standing together, talking quietly as they watched Killian, who stared back in turn.

"I've been obsessing over finding the portal user who helped the Order of Redeeming Light for a while," Liara said. "The order members themselves still won't talk, and we've had some of them for months now. Their god wasn't even their god and they're still zealots."

"Carlos says that we need to stop thinking of them as ideologues and start thinking of them as victims," Jason said. "Just as much as people turned into vampires."

"I'm well aware of what Carlos thinks," Liara said. "The Adventure Society turned all my prisoners over to the Church of the Healer. You think this man will be more forthcoming?"

"He's practical. Self-serving. He'll be willing to make some kind of deal."

"And you're alright with that? I know what he did to you."

"Here's something that won't be in the Adventure Society's file on me," Jason told her. "While I was in the other world, one of the very few gold rankers there killed my brother, my lover and my friend. When the time came, and I had him at my mercy, I gave him to someone else for their own revenge. I was burning so hot for vengeance at the start, but I came to realise that it's just empty."

"You had a gold ranker at your mercy?"

"Circumstances," he said. "My whole life is exploiting circumstances to stay alive when, by every sensible metric, I should die. Or stay dead; it varies."

"You made the right choice calling us in. Not just because of what was waiting for you here, but it plays into the story we're trying to sell about your willingness to defer to the Adventure Society. Giving up personal vengeance for the communal good will sit well with people who know your going off with Soramir is just a charade. Some of them worry that you roaming around in secret is worse than letting you do so openly."

"Let," Jason said, dissatisfaction in his voice as he zeroed in on her word choice.

"Yes, Jason. Let. The point is to demonstrate that you're not a madman on the loose with unknown powers, answering to no one."

"Team player, that's me," he grumbled.

"If you're going to leave Killian to us, would you like to speak to him first, or walk away entirely?"

"I may be willing to walk away from revenge," Jason said, "but I won't be giving up on villain banter. I don't have it in me."

She gave him a flat look.

"Yeah, I know," he complained. "No-fun, stern-adventurer Jason."

Cassin Amouz had not participated in the raid itself but had been the driving force behind the Amouz family's contribution to the operation. He arrived in the aftermath, being shown into the warehouse by some of his own people. He spotted Liara speaking to a man wrapped in what looked like a portal, who had to be Jason Asano. Cassin strode over to Liara as Asano stepped inside the ritual circle and approached the prisoner.

"Princess Liara," he greeted.

"Lord Amouz. Thank you again for your support of this operation."

"Consider me motivated to root out all the people who have betrayed our Kingdom and our world. This sickly thing you have chained up knows the traitor who helped take my son?"

Liara nodded as Cassin looked around.

"And the other thing?" he asked. "She's here?"

Liara nodded to where Clive, Farrah and Belinda were still badgering the ritualist with questions.

"Darker skin," she said, to differentiate the fair-skinned Farrah from the swarthy Belinda.

Cassin moved over to them.

"Belinda Callahan?" he said.

"I didn't take it," Belinda said, pointing at Clive. "I saw him doing something; I'm pretty sure it was him."

"What was him?" Cassin asked as Clive rolled his eyes and went back to examining the ritual diagram on the ground.

"Nothing," Belinda said. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Farrah sighed, giving Belinda a look she normally reserved for Jason.

"I'm Farrah Hurin," she introduced herself. "And yes, this is Belinda Callahan. You're Lord Cassin Amouz, are you not?"

"I am. I've wanted to take the chance to thank you, Miss Callahan. The bold risk you took in infiltrating the Order of Redeeming Light's stronghold is the reason my son was brought home before they finished infecting him with their heinous magic. You have the eternal gratitude of the Amouz family, and me, his father, most of all. If you ever have need of anything at all—"

"Ooh, free stuff!"

Farrah sharply nudged Belinda with her elbow.

"I mean, you're very welcome," Belinda corrected.

"How is Young Master Gibson?" Farrah asked.

"Yeah," Belinda said, her tone suddenly less playful. "He wasn't in the best way, last time I saw him. I wasn't in time to help him."

"Yes you were," Cassin said. "The specialist from the Church of the healer is optimistic. *Cautiously* optimistic, as he repeatedly specifies, but it's hope."

He settled his gaze firmly on Belinda.

"Hope that you have given me," he told her. "And I meant it when I said if you ever need anything. All the free stuff you can carry."

"You may want to rethink that offer, lord Amouz," Farrah said. "She has a storage space power and a lot of imagination."

Belinda didn't say anything glib, thrown by the sincerity of Cassin's gratitude. It was not something she was used to and she suddenly felt awkward. He recognised that and nodded.

"I have a lot to organise here, so I shall leave you now. But the door of the Amouz family is always open to you, Miss Callahan."

When Cassin left, Farrah nudged Belinda's shoulder.

"Feels good, doesn't it? Genuinely helping someone. It's why you're better off being an adventurer than a thief."

“You’re right,” Belinda said, holding up a pocket watch. “You should probably have this back.”

Farrah frowned as she took it from Belinda’s hand.

“How did you even get this?”

Enveloped in a starry void, Jason looked more like he was floating than walking as he moved, but he dismissed the cloak as he reached Killian. He stood in front of the pale elf chained to a thick metal pole. Killian had a narrow, bony frame and pallid skin, which was unlike the normally hale appearance that even elves that weren’t essence users had.

“You certainly look more impressive than the last time I saw you, Asano.”

“You look about the same. I’m told that each time we rank up, we get closer to how we are represented in our souls. That makes your soul pretty damn ugly.”

“And yours tediously vain. You’re a lot prettier at silver rank, Asano.”

“I look more like my brother than I used to. That used to annoy me.”

Killian narrowed his eyes.

“He died, didn’t he? Your fault?”

“Not my fault. It was another selfish prick like you.”

“Ah,” Killian said. “My mistake was that I assumed that you would seek me out in vengeance for what I’ve done to you. It never actually occurred to me that you would be willing to bring in outsiders and let them take that from you. But it seems you’ve tasted vengeance and found it not to your liking.”

“You seem rather calm, given the circumstances.”

“Oh, I have many secrets, many resources and contacts; knowledge and insights that are very valuable. Especially to groups that cannot do what I have done, yet desire what I have gained from doing them. Organisations tend to make deals with people as useful as me, rather than killing us for our many transgressions.”

“Which is what will happen here, I’m sure. So long as they’re adequately fed, I imagine you’ll live long enough to finagle your freedom again, sooner or later. We live very long lives.”

“And you can accept all that? I thought you were an idealist.”

“I was. Still am, I hope. But I’ve come to realise that taking the best that things *can* be is better than lamenting the way they *should* be.”

“A man of compromise, now?”

“Maybe. Sometimes it feels like I’m the only one willing to do what it takes to turn what should be into what can.”

“You sound tired, Asano.”

“Actually, I’m better than I’ve been in a long time. I’m just tired of compromising with people like you. That’s why the Adventure Society can have you. Make a deal, kill you, let you go; I wash my hands of it. I was done with you a long time ago.”

“Yet you couldn’t resist talking to me.”

"It's true. I'm testing myself, I think. Can I let what you've done go and leave you to the authorities and whatever slack they may cut you?"

“And how is the test going?”

“Unremarkably. I’m a little surprised, to be honest. Until I heard your name again, I hadn’t thought about you in a long time. Turns out it’s because I didn’t care.”

“Is the same true for your pet thief with the pretty silver hair? She’s been giving me a look that says she wants to kill me.”

“That’s because she does want to kill you. But she didn’t spare you a thought either, until your name came up. You’re a target of opportunity, and that’s all. At the end of the day, you just don’t matter. You’re a lesson of days gone.”

“Listen to you. You’re quite the big shot, now, but I’ve seen you naked and helpless. Not just without your clothes, but without that ridiculous mask you use to hide away the malevolence inside you.”

“I don’t hide it, Laurent. Not anymore. I use it, as needed, and then I put it away until the next prick like you comes along. But you know, if I asked these people to let me take you away, they would.”

“I imagine so.”

“But I’m not going to do that. You’re responsible for enough stains on my soul already; you aren’t worth another. I suppose this is the part where I tell you all the terrible things I could do to you – and they are very terrible – but I just can’t be bothered.”

“I believe you, Asano. I know a little about the forces with which you seem to be involved, and they’re very intimidating. Why do you think I wanted to kill you? If we meet again, I’m fairly certain that goal will be out of my reach. In fact, you’ll probably be able to kill me out of hand.”

“You may be right. Would you be interested in garnering a little goodwill, for when that day comes?”

“You want something from me.”

“You secured the service of a portal user for your brother. A friend of mine would very much like that name.”

“And if you walk out of this ritual circle with it, it makes you look good in front of all the fancy folk who are oh-so-scared of you right now. Helps buy you the time to grow strong enough that you don’t have to care what they think.”

“Pretty much. But it also signals to them that you’re amenable to working with them. Given the reticence of your brother and his friends, that’s a valuable signal to send.”

Killian and Jason looked at each other in silence for a long time.

“Despite my best efforts, I’ve underestimated how dangerous you are, haven’t I?”

“Yes.”

Killian jerked his head, indicating all the people around them in the warehouse.

“They don’t know that they’ve done the same yet, do they?”

“No.”

“And you need to become stronger before they realise. You aren’t afraid I’ll tell them?”

“You don’t know enough to make more than baseless predictions. They know I’m dangerous enough now that they won’t risk pushing. Not on your word.”

“There are some who would.”

“There always are.”

Killian chuckled.

“Yes, there are. Esteban Galo is the name you are looking for, Mr Asano.”

“Thank you, Mr Laurent. You’ll forgive me if I hope we never see each other again.”

“Mr Asano, you’ll find my hope on that count to have significantly more fervour than yours.”