

Chapter 600

Dear John

Jason tossed the list of names onto the table in front of him.

“This is what Dawn was up to,” he said as he rubbed his temples. “She could have told me. It’s not like I was doing much more than lounging about recovering.”

He got up and moved out onto the pagoda balcony, leaning on the rail and looking out to sea. In the distance, light was flaring as a magical storm was absorbed by a windmill-like mana accumulator.

Farrah moved to stand next to him.

“She knew she’d have to talk you into it.”

“So she left, knowing I’d go along because she wasn’t here to argue with and I’m sentimental.”

“A mortal failing, she called it.”

“Then I guess I’m not that mortal. We are *not* taking Zara Rimaros as an auxiliary team member. If nothing else, she’s a full-blown adventurer. Auxiliaries are taken for their specialty skills, and her specialty is blowing up a bunch of monsters with typhoon powers.”

Farrah took a recording crystal from her pocket and held it out for him to take. Jason groaned.

“She left a recording crystal with you and bailed again?” he asked. “These are starting to feel like Dear John letters.”

“What’s a Dear John letter?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jason said.

“I’ll give you some privacy to watch it. Just remember that we’re going out to help Autumn find a familiar this afternoon.”

“Yeah.”

Farrah went to the elevating platform and left Jason alone in his suite. He moved inside and a crystal projector formed out of cloud stuff. It was a small plinth, capped by a pyramid, atop which was a slot for a recording crystal. Jason placed the crystal Farrah had given him and then dropped into a sprawl across a couch. A large image of Dawn’s face flickered into place over the projector, making Jason feel like he was looking at a hologram of Emperor Palpatine.

“Sorry for the galactic emperor look,” the projection said. “I was hoping it would make it feel less like a Dear John letter.”

“We could have just had a conversation,” Jason muttered.

“I know we could have just had a conversation,” Dawn said, “but conversations with you always go awry from what the other person intends.”

“Not always.”

“Yes, always.”

Jason looked at the projection, affronted. Dawn laughed.

“I wish I could see your face right now. You’re not as unpredictable as you think, Jason.”

Jason's mouth formed a thin line as he pressed his lips hard together in frustration.

“Yes,” Dawn said, “I know you’re grouchy that you can’t talk back, but that’s the point. This isn’t a discussion. You’re going to sit and listen, get crabby about it, then accept what I’ve done because I’m not here to argue with and it feels wrong to deny me without having me here to argue with.”

“I'm starting to hate this recording.”

“I’ve been discussing with the Adventure Society about this false identity. Since you’ll be signing on with your own team as an auxiliary, it will be less obvious if your team takes on multiple auxiliaries at once.”

“I know. I’ve seen the list.”

“You’re still passive-aggressively having a conversation with a recording aren’t you?”

Jason glared at the image.

“But here’s the good news,” Dawn said. “The list is fake.”

“What?”

“I knew you’d get cranky, so I made a list of names that would annoy you, so that you’d be less angry with the real list.”

“I wouldn’t have to get cranky if you didn’t give me a fake list full of people I’d never take. I bet you did this for laughs.”

“Also, I thought it would be funny.”

“I knew it! You knew you were just... and I’m still talking to a recording.”

Dawn's expression softened and the image zoomed out, showing that she was sitting on the grass on a hillside somewhere, in a white summer dress. It was decorated with images of a flower known as phoenix wing.

“This is going to be a new start for you, Jason. You’ve told me about when you first came to this world and all the promise it held. This is your chance to have that adventuring career you were imagining back then. Maybe not exactly as you imagined it, but I suspect you won’t be too unhappy with having a secret identity.”

Dawn’s image looked regretful, as did Jason’s watching it.

"I guess I should give you the real list of names," she said. "Rufus, obviously. He'll fight with you, but strictly speaking, he'll be listed as a trainer. You still have a lot to learn from him, and your friend Taika could benefit from his knowledge as well. Gary is another easy inclusion. Once he finds out that you can just conjure up all the rare materials he could ask for to practise his smithing, I'm certain he'll jump at the chance, even if he can't take his results out of your soul space. Just make sure he does some work where people can use the results, as well. I imagine that diamond-rank mentor of his will turn up regularly to keep him on the right path."

Jason couldn't argue with those picks.

"You should consider Estella Warnock, as well. I think you would be better than me making that approach, but she'll work well with Belinda and she seems a little lost. Also, I know you love her pink hair, so maybe try to hide your celestine fetish at least a little."

"I do not have a... I'm arguing with no one again. Also, I'm lying."

"Yes you do have a fetish," Dawn said. "Stop lying to yourself."

Jason grumbled at the projection.

"Those are the easy picks," Dawn said. "Next come people you aren't so familiar with. There's a man named Amos Pensinata. He's a gold ranker that you've probably heard of. Like you, he's had some experiences with soul trauma that left him with a more capable aura than most. I've convinced him to travel with you for a time and teach you some of the things he's learned about soul manipulation. Some of it will come from his own experiences, while others will be things you would normally learn at or just before gold rank. Fortunately, Mr Pensinata takes a more learn-as-need view."

Jason was familiar with Pensinata by reputation. He was the man who had defeated the same forces that had forced Jason to almost kill himself fleeing in the underwater complex.

"Pensinata has one condition for travelling with you, which is that he brings his nephew with him. The young man has a problem common to adventurers in high-magic zones: he was sheltered through iron and bronze rank and lacks independent experience. Pensinata wishes for his nephew to get some seasoning, away from his overprotective parents."

"He's not going to kidnap his nephew, is he?"

"Carlos Quilido can tell you more about Amos, as they have known each other for a long time."

"That wasn't a no."

“Speaking of which, Quilido is also on the list. Your soul space will be a powerful tool in researching what has been done to the Order of Redeeming Light members. Which means bringing along the captured Order of Redeeming Light members.”

“How many people do you think I can fit in the cloud flask’s vehicle construct?” Jason asked the projection.

“I know that means a lot of people, but you should probably keep the prisoners in your soul space anyway.”

"You can sod that idea right off. I'm not turning my soul into bloody Arkham Asylum."

"I'm assuming," Dawn's recording said, "that you just went on some kind of colourful tirade because apparently, the word 'no' is too efficient for you."

“It lacks emphasis!” Jason yelled at the projection.

“If you really can’t accept the idea, I have already discussed some alternatives – less secure alternatives – with Priest Quilido.”

“Damn right. Carlos can buy a prison bus or something.”

"There is one more person who needs to go along, and this is the one you're not going to like. The Adventure Society wants a representative attached to your team. Something of a personal liaison to you."

“You mean a spy.”

“Yes, basically a spy.”

"Stop predicting what I'm going to say!"

“No.”

“Arrgh!”

Jason watched Dawn’s laughing figure, realising that being there, teasing his future self was possibly the last piece of unadulterated fun she had before heading off into the cosmos on Very Serious Business.

“I don’t know who they’re going to choose for you,” he said, “but I think they know better than to make some foolish choice. They know you’ll flat-out refuse if they don’t find someone acceptable and that pressuring you won’t work. I made sure they at least understood that much.”

“Good,” Jason said.

Dawn’s image took on a sad smile.

“We said our goodbyes in your soul space, so I won’t retread that ground,” she said.

“I hope that when I see you again, you don’t think too poorly of me.”

She made a gesture and the recording ended.

Jason still hadn't emerged from his suite since Farrah gave him the recording when Liara arrived at the cloud house. Shade led Liara to one of the mezzanine lounges, filled with leafy plants and overlooking the atrium. Although opaque from the outside, the atrium wall rising halfway up the tower was transparent from the inside and let in plenty of natural light. Farrah was waiting for her at a table, drinking a tall glass of iced tea. She poured another for Liara from a pitcher as she gestured for the princess to join her.

"What brings you here?" Farrah asked as Liara sat. "We have an activity soon and are pressed for time."

"Assisting Miss Leal with her familiar ritual, yes. Quite a small-scale activity, given surrounding events."

"We're looking for small, Princess. And we value friendship."

Liara nodded.

"Mr Asano knows about the Adventure Society liaison?" she asked.

"I gave him the message Dawn left behind, but he hasn't emerged since. I don't know what his reaction will be. Dawn tried to manage him as best she could, but there's only so much managing you can do with Jason. And only so much we're willing to. He might need some rough edges shaved off, from time to time, but we're on his side first. Not the Adventure Society's and certainly not your family's."

"I have no qualms with loyalty, Miss Hurin. Loyal people are reliable, and I've found over the decades of my career that consistency is more valuable than capability. If you find someone with both, you treasure them."

"Has the society come up with a liaison they think Jason will accept?"

"I have a name, but whether he'll accept it is still up in the air. But I'm here for another reason. Related to your upcoming activity, in fact."

"Oh?"

"There is a lot of talk related to Jason floating around, but the amount of accurate information varies wildly amongst different circles."

"And?"

"And when information is scarce, people have a habit of taking what they know – or what they've been told, true or not – and adding in their own assumptions to fill in the gaps."

"And then those assumptions ferment into facts in their mind."

"Just so, Miss Hurin."

"And someone has made some assumptions about Jason?"

“There are certain sectors of the adventuring community – the bottom tier guilds and other, less formalised groups – where information about Jason has taken on a certain tone. Some rather drastic assumptions have been made and are threatening to head in a less-than-ideal direction.”

“How so?”

“Information on Jason’s actual combat ability hasn’t spread nearly as far as his name.”

“I see where this is going,” Farrah said. “Someone has convinced themselves that Jason is all reputation and no power, and think that taking him out is their pathway to fame and prestige.”

“More or less.”

“And they know what we’re up to today.”

“Yes.”

“Did you leak it so that these idiots would be coming after us and ruining Autumn’s attempt to find a new familiar?”

“Of course not.”

“You know she lost her familiar defending Rimaros.”

“I do.”

“It’s been traumatic enough for her, without some idiots coming along and ruining what’s already hard enough.”

“I know.”

“Do you, Princess?”

“Miss Hurin, I was in the bowels of that flying city. I had friends and family convince me to let them sacrifice themselves. I would never do what you’re suggesting to someone who made sacrifices for my city and my kingdom.”

“But I’m not talking about you using her as bait. I’m talking about you using Jason as bait, which you’ve done before. Autumn would just be collateral.”

“I didn’t do this, Miss Hurin. It came from some Magic Society source. No conspiracy, just some administrator who saw that Miss Leal had registered she was going to go out and conduct a binding ritual, with a list of who was going to stand watch for her. An opportunist sold some information, we heard about it and I came to warn you.”

A portal opened and Jason stepped out.

“You’re going to do more than warn us, Princess.”