

Chapter 598

The Making of That Man

Havi Estos was not used to feeling insignificant. His connections spanned from the very top of society to the very bottom, and he was valuable enough to both that he had secured his position as the consummate middleman. He was also a successful former silver-rank adventurer. Perhaps not from a top guild, but certainly from a respectable one, and any adventurer that could hold their own in Rimaros was worthy of note.

After emerging from Asano's portal, Havi took an icy shower, then found himself staring in his bathroom mirror. He was a sizeable man, with onyx skin and gold eyes that matched his long hair. He looked at his expression and could see for himself how shaken he looked.

He had only met Asano once, when he dropped off a package from Havi's old adventuring friend, Mordant Kerr. Kerr had been in charge of a fortress town during the surge and sent Asano with a package containing a recording of Asano wiping out a monster wave threatening that town. Havi had thought nothing of the ordinary-seeming man until he looked at the recording after he was gone.

Kerr had wanted to connect Havi and Asano, recognising that Asano could use Havi's contacts and Havi would do well to get on good terms before Asano's rise to prominence. The disparity between the amiable man he met and the slaughter machine in the recording had triggered Havi's sense of caution and he had begun investigating. Asano unexpectedly catching wind of it had cost Havi the valuable services of Estella Warnock, whose grandfather was another of Havi's adventuring contemporaries.

Asano's name came up in the course of Havi's general practice of knowing things that most people didn't, in increasingly alarming ways. Asano's connections reached the top of Rimaros society, somehow coming in a downward direction from some elusive upper echelon to which even the royal family seemed to bend. It remained a mystery until the active presence of Soramir Rimaros, the founder of the Storm Kingdom himself, became known.

The more Asano's name came to his attention, the more Havi had grown concerned. Others were coming to him as an information broker for details on Asano, which Havi had continued to gather, albeit much more carefully than he had before. He had seen what Asano's enemies looked like, what had come of them, and worried that Asano might consider the slight of Havi sending someone to probe his aura as antagonistic.

Asano's enemies list was formidable, relative to his rank, and the mysteries surrounding him were highly suggestive. What had come of those enemies did not bode well for anyone who caught Asano's ire: what did it take to make a personal enemy of the dimensional being waging war on an entire world?

Havi was wary of approaching Asano, even though it was possible Asano hadn't given Havi a second thought. Bringing himself back to Asano's attention could have been buying real trouble to avoid imaginary danger, but it had not been something he was willing to risk. He didn't want to be on Asano's enemies list, having seen Asano's other enemies. But his enquiries into Asano's past had turned up one enemy that stood out from the others, for having gotten away.

Killian Laurent was already known to Havi, but only by reputation. Havi might work with some less-than-reputable figures, but Laurent was known for having no depth to which he would not stoop. There were no lines he would not cross, no villain he wouldn't work with and no depravity he would not exploit.

The more he looked into it, the more that Laurent seemed like the way to turn things around with Asano. He'd missed out on an opportunity to make a connection with an adventurer with mysterious influence in the corridors of power and whose rise to prominence seemed inevitable. Delivering Killian Laurent on a plate could rectify that mistake in a big way.

Havi was still making preparations when Asano's predicted leap into wider attention came both sooner and more ostentatiously than Havi's most outlandish predictions. Asano's display of his aura blanketing the sky and his transforming house was something everyone became aware of. What came next, though, didn't just grab the attention of the powerful and well informed; it scared them. Asano telling the Builder to pack up and go home was one thing. The Builder actually doing it was another.

It was clear to the many observers that Asano was not just dealing with gods and great astral beings but that he had been for some time. Where had he gone during the mysterious period he was believed dead? What had he done, and why was he back? Havi only had answers to some of those questions, and unreliable ones, at that.

Getting on Asano's good side had very much landed on the top of Havi's priority list and he had accelerated his preparations to serve up Laurent. He had not pushed so hard as to spook Laurent, or at least, so he had thought. Leaving his bathroom in a soft robe, he discovered that he had made two critical underestimations. One was Laurent's ability to realise he was being looked into, and the other was Laurent's ability to bypass the protection magic on his house.

“Wow, that was fast,” Belinda said she watched five men move an unconscious Havi out of his house and into a carriage. It set off down the street, in the direction of the docks. There was no shortage of drunken revellers on the streets, but the warehouse district was fairly clear and the docks weren’t a festival area. The vehicle would be able to pass through without being blocked by crowds.

Jason’s voice chat didn’t extend from Livaros where Belinda was to the pagoda where Humphrey had teleported him to recuperate from overstressing his portal ability again. She relayed the information through Shade, hidden in her shadow.

“Already?” Jason complained when Shade reported the information. He had barely laid down to rest. “Come on, I’m still wrecked from portalling Estos through his damn house wards. It’s going to be a couple of hours before I’m combat-ready again.”

“I told you it was the wrong move,” Neil said. “As the team healer, I strongly advise against harming yourself just so you can show off an ability that would be better kept secret anyway.”

“Agreed,” Humphrey said. “Shade, is Estos still alive?”

Most of the group was in a lounge area, gathered around the reclining Jason, either portalled back by Clive or teleported in by Humphrey. Only Sophie and Belinda had stayed to watch Laurent’s home on Belinda’s hunch.

“He is alive,” Shade said. “Miss Belinda would also like me to iterate that she was, indeed, correct.”

As they chatted in Alejandro’s store following Havi’s dismissal, Belinda had voiced the opinion that Havi was underestimating his exposure to Laurent.

“We already know he’s tipped off target’s he’s been looking into in the past,” she had said. “I’m guessing that Laurent might turn the tables, maybe try and set a trap for Jason. I say we watch the guy and see if Laurent makes a move in the wake of Estos meeting with us.”

“That would mean Laurent would have to know about Estos meeting with us,” Humphrey pointed out.

“Yep,” Belinda had agreed.

The result was the team’s illicit activity specialists keeping a watch on Havi’s place, and they had barely arrived when five men moved an unconscious Havi from his home into waiting transport.

“Tell Belinda to track the carriage,” Humphrey said. “Hopefully, it will lead us to Laurent and we can jump on him before he lays a trap for us.”

“Unless this *is* the trap for us,” Jason pointed out. “You know, I think we might be approaching this the wrong way.”

“How so?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t think Laurent is going to be a big fan of playing fair, so why should we?”

Havi was unconscious, bound to a thick metal pole by heavy chains. Even with a suppression collar, the raw strength of a silver ranker was no small thing, so both the poles and the chains had been strongly reinforced with magic. Killian Laurent took the stopper from a small alchemical vial and waved it under Havi’s nose.

Havi awoke with a start.

“Steal some mushrooms!” he yelled deliriously.

“What?” Killian asked.

“What?” a bleary-eyed Havi asked in return, head swaying as he blinked, his senses slowly coming back. He looked around, seeing that he was in a featureless room where the walls, floor and ceiling were all metal. It had no windows but a pair of large doors, suggesting it might be some kind of warehouse.

He had a groggy recollection of being woken in similar fashion and threatened with unpleasantly specific forms of violence if he didn’t go through a portal. As his senses somewhat cleared, he looked at the emaciated and sickly white man standing in front of him. He had never seen Killian Laurent, but the man perfectly fit Laurent’s distinctive description.

“Oh, crap.”

"Indeed," Killian agreed. "You wanted to use me as a resource? To feed me to Jason Asano? You should have stuck to information trading, Mr Estos, because information gathering is not your area."

“You won’t get away with kidnapping me right out of the city.”

“Oh, I know. Jason Asano has developed quite the remarkable team since I last met him. I don’t know exactly how they’ll track us down. Maybe the former thief secretly placed tracking magic on you during your meeting. Perhaps the astral magic specialist will trace the portal used to bring you here. My people made sure they left the city’s tracking area before portalling from a boat at sea, but I don’t think that will stop them. They are quite the resourceful group. Powerful, as well, which is why I’ve taken the time to set things up quite thoroughly. The only reason I’m keeping you alive is in case there’s some tracking magic I can’t sense on you that will be negated on your death.”

Killian moved close to Havi. Killian was shorter by almost a full head, but grinned malevolently as he tilted his head back to lock eyes with the former adventurer.

“Once I realised that you were looking into me, I started moving things into place. I could have run, but that was not a convenient approach, given all this monster surge unpleasantness. Instead, I made sure that it would look like I was running to anyone who bothered to investigate, so it looked like I was being sloppy. I thought it was best to give you a little sense of urgency, so you would be the one who got sloppy. Which you did. You’re a good middleman, Estos, but your expertise lies in helping upstanding citizens connect with not-so-upstanding citizens, without being seen with the riffraff. This spider-at-the-heart-of-an-information-web thing you’re trying to expand into isn’t going to work.”

“Laurent,” Havi said. “I know you’re evil. You don’t have to make a big speech explaining your plan to prove it.”

Killian chuckled as he turned to put a little distance between Havi and himself.

“Bravado. I like it. I have a client who enjoys breaking down the tough ones, so you’ll be quite lucrative for me. Once Asano and his team are dealt with, which is no small thing. You won’t sense them, with that suppression collar on, but there is a coterie of gold-rank mercenaries here, waiting for the arrival of Asano and his team. I know better than to take them on directly with anything but massively overwhelming force.”

Killian shook his head.

“It’s unfathomably expensive to hire discreet gold-rankers who will work outside of the normal channels, you know. Fortunately, the monster surge has been very lucrative for me.”

“Tragedy often is, to bastards with no scruples,” Havi said, spitting out the words like a curse. “You’ll work with anyone. Builder cult, Red Table, those Purity lunatics.”

“Yes,” Killian agreed with a laugh. “It’s been working out quite nicely for me. But if I’d known he would eventually cost me this much money and attention, I’d never have left Asano alive. At the time, it seemed like a worthwhile distraction, since I didn’t want his friends seeking me out in anger. I’m not sure if you know who Danielle Geller is, but she’s not someone you want motivated to hunt you down, believe me.”

“Neither is Asano,” Havi said.

“That’s certainly true now, which is why I’m going to all this effort. Who would have thought that he would fight off a star seed, even if the ritual powering it was left unattended? You know, I rather think I was the making of that man. I could never have foreseen setting in motion a chain of events that would have my dear brother helping the Builder arrange for him to arrive here from another world. Asano lives an inconveniently

outrageous life, which I now need to put a stop to. Luckily, you aren't the only one with some impressive connections, and certain people are likewise eager to see Asano's demise. Otherwise, I might not have been able to arrange all these gold-rankers, no matter how much money I threw around."

"Boss," one of Killian's thuggish lackeys said. He had been monitoring a magical projection floating over a ritual on the floor behind where Havi was chained up, out of his line of sight. The projection displayed the intricate web of alarm arrays placed around their location.

"Ah," Killian said. "It seems like the guests have arrived. I assume Asano brought his full team, plus the Remore boy and his team as well."

"Boss, I'm not so sure this is Asano. The alarms are picking up a whole bunch of gold-rankers."

"What?"