

## Chapter 501

### Murky Waters

Jason felt the emotions play out in the auras around him. At the centre was the man on the other side of the tailor shop's glass, Kasper Irios. A peak-level bronze-ranker, he was standing frozen, gripping the handle of the almost-closed door. His shock was as plainly written on his face as his aura after hearing Jason's name.

The man who had spoken his name, Alejandro Albericci, was also a silver-ranker. The moment he sensed the reaction of Kasper, his welcoming aura filled with surprise and then suspicion with an underlying strain of anger. Jason realised that he wasn't party to the play being acted out, with whoever wrote the script remaining hidden in the wings.

Rufus was confused, having picked up on the tension in Jason's body language and the obvious link to the man on the other side of the glass. He was smart enough to know that if he didn't have the information to act, he should keep his mouth shut and listen, looking to Jason for direction.

Jason's aura was unreadable to the other silver-rankers, but the anger over being played yet again flashed on his face before he schooled his expression.

"Mr Albericci," Jason said. "This is Rufus Remore, out of Vitesse. I would appreciate you seeing to his needs while I take Mr Irios for a little walk. Let's not make a scene in your place of business."

Alejandro looked Jason in the eyes. Jason's aura revealed only its normal, polite façade, leaving him to assess Jason by what he could see. Jason was wearing his usual tourist-in-the-tropics outfit but the tailor knew better than most that it was not clothes that made the man.

"Thank you, Mr Asano. I appreciate the courtesy."

Kasper Irios was still gripping the handle of the almost-closed door, letting go and stepping back as Jason pulled it open. The bronze-ranker's movements were oddly stumbling for an adventurer, his physical unbalance revealing the depth of his mental equivalent.

"Kasper Irios, I take it?" Jason asked. "I'm Jason Asano. Just to get it out of the way: yes, the dead one. You and I are going to take a little walk."

Kasper's initial shock was giving way to wariness.

"How am I meant to know you are who you say?"

"It's a fair question," Jason said. "It's not every day your former fiancé's dead fake lover comes back to life. Not sure what to tell you, though. I don't think they make a

greeting card for 'sorry I used your death to avoid a political marriage and got you caught up in a huge mess although in fairness you were dead and that's not something I had a reasonable expectation of you coming back from.' It'd be hard to fit on the cover, if nothing else."

"What are you talking about? What's a greeting card?"

"Right, other world. Do you have gift baskets here?"

"Uh, yes. I'm not sure what-"

"A greeting card is like that, except instead of being full of nice things it's a piece of card stock. It's like a social puzzle where you have to figure out how long you need to leave it sitting around before you can throw it away without being rude."

Jason tapped the pin on his chest and an invisible privacy screen shielded them from eavesdropping. It wasn't impenetrable, but anyone who could do so without Jason noticing was out of his league anyway. It would be enough to stop the hidden observers Jason could sense already paying them attention.

"Let's walk, Mr Irios."

Jason felt fear from the bronze-ranker.

"I'm not sure I should be going places with you."

"We're not going anywhere," Jason said. "We're just going to wander around on the street a little, in front of plenty of people and have a nice chat. Well, a chat, anyway."

They started walking along the street, side by side. The streets were wide shopping boulevards with plenty of other traffic, both on foot and using various means of transport. They were far from the only people using privacy screens, unseen to the eye but visible to magical senses.

Alejandro's shopfront was part of a shopping district located between the more open market district and the more industrious craftsman's quarter. It was comprised of boutique stores catering to adventurers, nobility and the wealthy. Many of the people walking the street were all three, making anyone that caused trouble very stupid indeed.

Jason and Kasper wandered along the street, in awkward silence, at first. Jason noted that many glances were cast at Kasper; he guessed as locals recognised either the house Irios crest on the arm of his clothes or Kasper himself, although no one greeted him as they passed.

"Mr Irios, someone told you to come here, and they didn't tell you the real reason why. We're both dancing on someone's palm and I don't know about you, but I don't like that. That being said, we need to step carefully. I've had my share of lessons in getting out of one mess by making a bigger one, and we both know that you have as well."

“I’m still not taking your word for who you claim to be.”

“Nor should you,” Jason agreed. “The whole point of having us meet like this is so that you will go out and investigate. Or, more precisely, so your family will. That’s one of several reasons someone arranged for us to meet like this. Someone wants to stir up murky waters.”

“Who?”

“House Irios and the royal family are both looking to settle things down after the mess that you and Zara made. The exact who doesn’t matter right now. First, you need to make sure that I am who I say I am. My return brings certain things to a head, which your family will need to handle carefully. You, yourself, will need some time to process. I certainly did. I came back from the dead and find that instead of the nice quiet stay in the tropics, I’m suddenly the dead paramour of some princess I met a couple of times three years ago. Plus the Builder’s trying to assassinate me again, but that bit’s not on you.”

“What?”

“Look, mate. You just found out that, one: I’m alive, and two: I’m here. There are ramifications that need to be thought through. Someone – who is going to get a good talking to – decided that having you and I bump into one another oh-so coincidentally would be a good way to do that murky water stirring.”

“Why?”

“Probably to see if we make a scene. They’re still trying to figure out how I handle myself and need to know if I’m reliable when put on the spot. I need to be a little bit of a controversial figure for what comes next, so a public confrontation between you and I wouldn’t hurt that goal. As for you, you’ve made trouble before. They want to know if you’ll do something stupid like run off to Zara and cook up another terrible plan.”

“I don’t think I should be talking to you.”

“Correct,” Jason said. “I’m going to tell you what you should be doing. You need to go home. You need to tell your family that you met me. Then you need to have a nice long think and a nice long talk with them. After that, you do what they tell you.”

Kasper went to respond but Jason silenced him with a gesture.

“Now, I’m going to tell you what you shouldn’t do. You should *not* go find your friend Zara and have her devise some plan to get some control over the situation that sets in motion a cascade of events that ruins everything for you, me, her, your family, the royal family and thousands of people who are relying on all of the above to keep them safe.”

“Oh, hey Kasper!”

A trio of young men in fine clothes was approaching them with waved greetings. They were all bronze-rank but close to silver, like Kasper himself. One was wearing a loose robe of light, breathable fabric, with the colours and emblem of the Magic Society. Not all Magic Society members were also adventurers, and the monster cores in the young man's aura suggested he was not. His aura control was solid, though, so he was not untrained.

The other two were more likely adventurers, from their clean auras. One wore a long jacket covered in pockets and potion-vial loops, marking him as an alchemist. The third bore no identifying equipment but Jason noted the precision of his movement and his attentiveness to the surroundings. Of the three Jason pegged him as the most capable.

Jason tapped his pin to drop the privacy screen.

"Hey, Kas," the Magic Society member said. "I thought the family had you bundled up indoors when you weren't out on a contract."

"I, uh, I came out to order some clothes."

The three picked up on Kasper's nervousness and moved their attention to its obvious source.

"Who's your friend, Kas?" the alchemist asked.

"Kasper's a little busy," Jason said. "You can catch up with him later."

Alongside his words, he sent a little stream of aura to the third member of the group, giving him a glimpse of what lay behind Jason's polite aura facade. The young man put a hand on each of his two friends' shoulders.

"We'll catch up with him later," he said, echoing Jason's words.

The other two looked from Jason to their friend and back to Jason, their communication through glances showing Jason how close they were.

"Alright, Kas," the alchemist said. "We'll come and find you at home."

"Thank you, Hils," Kasper said. "I'll see you all later, then."

The trio moved on, throwing curious looks back at Jason.

"You know those three are going to talk," Kasper said.

Jason reinstated the privacy screen.

"My return is going to bring issues around you and Zara to the fore," Jason said.

"Events are being set in motion. Your family, and now those three, are going to ask questions. When they do, undercurrents will start to flow."

"I think I do need to go home."

"Yes, you do," Jason said. "Look, I know what you're going through. You just found out a bunch of crazy stuff, you haven't had time to sort through it and there's some guy

who won't stop talking and you understand maybe a third of what he's saying at best. You need to stop, take stock and sort through everything. Talk to your family."

Kasper nodded.

"Good. Now, someone from your family will want to talk to me. You probably will too, once you've had time to sit with this for a while. When you're ready, come find me on Arnote. I'm staying in a little town called Palisaros. Just ask around and someone will point you my way."

Kasper took a personal floater disc out from the dimensional bag on his hip. Before he stepped onto it, he turned to look at Jason.

"If you are who you say, I want you to know I'm sorry," he said. "It never felt right, using your name the way we did. It's just..."

"Better to invoke the dead than hurt the living."

Kasper nodded.

"I won't say I wasn't angry," Jason said. "I was. Still am, to be honest, but that doesn't help us right now. I can yell at you in private, once you come find me."

"Does Zara know?"

"You didn't talk to her?"

"Her family keeps her on a narrow line since everything happened. We don't see each other much anymore. She said it wouldn't look good, anyway."

Kasper gave Jason a sad smile, stepped onto his float disc and drifted off. Jason watched him go, then tapped his pin to drop the privacy screen and started walking back toward the tailor shop.

"Tell your boss," he muttered, "the next time she wants me to dance, she needs to let me know before the music starts or she'll find me stepping on her feet."

He sensed the observers start moving away.

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Adventure Society Director was a prominent position in any community. In a major adventuring hub like Rimaros, that was even more true. It was a demanding and high-pressure job, although the prestige and social standing that came with it were not inconsiderable. The director mixed with kings and queens, famous adventurers and foreign dignitaries. A director who did their job well found that once they moved on from the position, many doors would open to them. Those that fell short dropped into a pit of obscurity from which there was no escape.

Gil Vinatos was the current occupant of the position, and fully aware that his performance in the coming weeks would define the rest of his life. An unprecedented

monster surge and the Builder invasion were more than enough, even without the reports that were starting to come in from around the world. For someone like him, who worked their way up from the bottom through solid administrative skills, it was a critical time.

He was taking a much-needed break, although he didn't have time for a long one. Laying out on his office couch, eyes closed as he ate sliced fruit from a bowl sitting on his chest was the most he could afford before he had to get back to work.

"A well-earned break, Mr Vinatos."

Gil sat bolt upright, the bowl tumbling to the floor. He couldn't sense the person who had just spoken at all, despite his gold-rank senses. Admittedly, his rank came from monster cores, but he had been diligent in his training. He was also the director of the Adventure Society, so his office was both very difficult and very foolish to break into. He saw a man sitting on the edge of his desk, emitting no discernable aura at all. Gil was about to ask who he was when he recognised the face.

In heart of the royal palace, which Gil had visited many times, was a hallway full of portraits that lead to the throne room. He had spent a certain amount of time waiting outside to be admitted and had looked over the closest portraits more than a few times. Gil recognised the man in front of him from one of those portraits. The one at the very end, right next to the throne room doors.

"I'm sorry, Mr Vinatos. I've made you drop your fruit."

## Chapter 502

### Integrity is Forever

Gil picked up his fruit from the floor, lamenting that he'd been too startled to catch it when, normally, his gold-rank reflexes would have no trouble doing so. Then he realised that Soramir could also have caught them even more easily but quickly quashed his annoyance at that. He looked up sheepishly, knowing that the diamond-ranker would have certainly sensed the emotion and where it was directed.

"Don't concern yourself, Mr Vinaros. I'm not here to make things harder for you."

Gil looked down at the bowl of fruit slices now covered in carpet fluff. He absently considered that he should have picked a carpet that handled the humidity better.

"Of course not, ancestral majesty."

Gil moved to his desk and sat the bowl down. Soramir stopped leaning on the desk and took one of the seats as Gil moved behind the desk before doing likewise.

"To what do I owe the honour?" Gil asked. "Is this related to the Builder city? Her highness, Princess Zila, informed me that you were monitoring it."

"Several of my peers are currently watching it in rotation," Soramir said. "We diamond-rankers are taking a more active role in current events, although we are keeping our activities quiet for the moment. Your position makes you one of the few with whom we are sharing our activities. Some of them, in any case."

"What can I do for you, ancestral majesty?"

"I need for you to arrange to have some people portalled here from Vitesse. Six silver-rankers and two bronze."

"Obviously, you're aware of how tightly regulated high-rank portal personnel are right now. While I respect the royal family - and you, in particular - I can't ask the Vitesse branch to make that kind of allocation without a valid reason."

Gil opened a drawer and took out a sheet of paper.

"Curiously," he said, "I just received a similar request from Vitesse. They want two silver-rankers portalled in the other direction. Normally I would suggest that we could save on resources by using the same portal specialist to send one group across and then the other back. I cannot help but feel, however, that these two requests share a connection."

Gil handed the paper over the table to Soramir, who glanced it over.

"Jason Asano and Farrah Hurin," he read. "Why am I not surprised? Your assumption is quite accurate."

Soramir put the paper on the desk, tapping it with his finger.

“This does not state the reason for the request.”

“It’s related to events taking place in the northern regions of Estercost. The Vitesse branch sent out an expedition to attack a Purity church stronghold and got more than they bargained for. It’s quite a mess right now, but somehow this Asano is involved. I’m having the analytical office prepare a full report for me to look at before I respond to the request.”

“Asano cannot be allowed to leave the Sea of Storms right now. You need to deny the request.”

“With respect, ancestral majesty, while I am open to any request you wish to make of this office, it’s just that: a request. You don’t tell this office what it can and cannot do.”

Soramir raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“I respect that, Mr Vinaros—”

“Director Vinaros, your majesty. For this conversation, it’s Director Vinaros.”

“Of course. Director, let me share my reasoning. During my time away, I became aware of preparations being made for the invasion of our world and returned to help the Storm Kingdom weather those events. Since my return to Rimaros, I have been investigating the activities of the Builder cult. I’ve even discretely been throwing some assistance to the Adventure Society’s Builder response unit.”

“This was not reported to me.”

“They don’t know I’ve been assisting them. I’ve recently contacted one of their leaders, my descendent, Liara. I will be working more closely with them going forward, so you can anticipate reports on the activities in question.”

“That is much appreciated.”

“One of the things I discovered was that several months ago, the Builder cult undertook some kind of infrastructure project, buried underneath an uninhabited island. They then abandoned the island entirely, so that their work couldn’t be found unless you knew to look.”

“Which you did, I assume.”

“Yes. It was some manner of astral beacon. Like other astral magic being used by the cult, it was very advanced, by the standards of this world. My initial thought was that it was a launch point for the coming invasion.”

“Did you destroy it?”

“I decided not to. The advantage in knowing where the enemy would arrive is considerable, as you can no doubt imagine. However, it was not an invasion force that came through but two silver-rankers, both of whom were listed as having died fighting the Builder cult several years ago.”



"The Builder resurrected them?"

"No, Asano is an outworlder and was resurrected on his own world. I believe he had an object called a World-Phoenix token that revived him and sent him back where he came from. As for his companion, she seems to have become an outworlder after her death by likewise resurrecting in Asano's homeworld. As for the specifics, I have no idea."

"There must be quite a story there."

"Yes, although they have chosen to share very little, thus far."

"They're silver-rankers. That isn't a choice they get to make. I'll have them brought in and—"

"I would hold off on that, Director Vinaros. If Asano has the backing that I suspect, he needs to be treated carefully. Not only will that mean there are powerful forces behind him but also that he has an important role to play."

"Then perhaps you should go to him personally. The attention of a diamond-ranker, especially one as prestigious as you will be flattering and get him onside."

"I have already met Mr Asano, but it turns out that he's grown tired of dealing with people far more powerful than he. Rather than impressed, he was annoyed and angry. Because of the way he seems to have been treated in the past, I believe that he will respond very positively to forthright honesty and plain dealing."

"Is that what your portal request is related to?"

"Yes. I want his team brought here to join him."

"Vitesse wants him there."

"We need him here. My understanding is that Asano himself found the means to return to our world, but the Builder had his people use the beacon to determine his arrival point. As for why they weren't waiting for them, I'm not sure."

"If the Builder wants him here, isn't sending his out of the Storm Kingdom the best option?"

"I believe the Builder's intention in bringing him here was to have him killed. The Builder has apparently agreed to some kind of restriction on how he attempts to do so and so has made concessions to his church of Purity allies to have them do it instead. One attempt has already been made. The Builder response unit is already working to interrogate the Purity loyalists we captured in the process."

"One of the church's more extreme orders has been operating in this part of the world for many years," Gil said. "It's unsurprising that they remained loyal. But what makes Asano worth all this attention?"

“Asano has already foiled the Builder’s plans more than once, and I believe is now affiliated with the Builder’s greater antagonist. What part Asano has left to play is unclear, but even before his death, he demonstrated an effect on those who wield the Builder’s power. He is, in fact, responsible for the very first live capture of someone with a star seed.”

“That’s all well and good,” Gil said, “but I’m not sure that my Vitesse counterpart will be willing to accommodate you. The information I’m getting is still unclear but they’ve had some unusual events that somehow this Asano is connected to.”

Soramir nodded.

“I would appreciate that report, Director, once your people have completed it.”

“They should have it to me within the day, depending on what information we can get out of Vitesse. I think the best solution, for the moment, is to wait for more information before making any firm decisions. There may be something you are overlooking, however.”

“Oh?” Soramir asked.

“Asano himself. We can ask him to go to Vitesse, not tell him. While the Adventure Society can ask quite firmly, he always has the option to refuse. If you can convince him to stay, my office will support the decision. We can make him available to the Vitesse branch via water link, which is exactly why we monopolise the links in the first place.”

Soramir nodded, stood up and offered his hand to Gil over the desk.

“Thank you, Director Vinaros.”

Gil shook Soramir’s hand a little nervously.

“I’ll do my best to accommodate you, your majesty, but my first loyalty must be to my position.”

“Of course.”

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Jason returned to Sensual Attire for the Sensual Gentleman, Alejandro Albericci’s tailor shop. Rufus was sitting in the café courtyard, sipping on a cup of tea.

“You took your time,” Rufus said as Jason sat down. “You didn’t kill the boy and bury him in the jungle did you?”

“What had Farrah been telling you?”

“Just wanted to make sure.”

“We just had a little talk,” Jason said. “I told him to go home and not make any trouble. That’s the only thing I did. I definitely didn’t stop for shopping on the way back.”

Rufus looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

"I mean, there was a whole shop for skill books. How could I not buy some for cooking magic? I don't have time to learn all about the magical ingredients and how to handle them without diverting time from training. You know how often people try to kill me."

"Have you heard anything about the people who were caught making the last attempt?"

"I've been told I'll be kept updated, although how reliable that assurance is remains to be seen. Liara said they'll probably want to involve me in the questioning."

"You really know how to get caught up in messes, don't you?"

"You said it was normal for outworlders to get caught up in stuff. You told me that the day we met."

"There's caught up and then there's you, Jason. I don't suppose you'd like to explain what this latest thing is? If that was Kasper Irios, then is this about—"

"Yeah, but no details, here. Back home, with Farrah. No point explaining it twice."

"Right."

"Did Alejandro set you up with some good clothes?"

"He measured me up while you were off on your latest debacle. I didn't have any good hot weather clothes, so once my new outfits are finished I'll be appreciative."

"Haven't you been living in Greenstone? That place is half desert, half sweltering delta. How did you not pick up any warm-weather outfits?"

"You know what the clothes are like there. It's as if someone threw up a rainbow of loose fabric and people just draped it over themselves. You know, Gary still dresses like that. Although, given what most leonids wear, anything is a step up."

"I didn't realise you were such a slave to fashion."

"The problem with Mr Remore," Alejandro said, approaching their table "is that for him, fashion is pointless. Look at the man: you could put him in a brown sack and he'd still be a work of art."

"Tell me about it," Jason said, standing to shake Alejandro's hand.

"Mr Asano, I apologise for my part in whatever political imbroglio you have been caught up in."

"You get used to it," Jason said. "At least with politics they only stab you in the back. It's a nice change from being stabbed in the everything."

They left Rufus to his tea and Alejandro led Jason to his measuring room.

"I have been directed to take your outfits in a certain direction," Alejandro explained as they walked. "That puts me in a slightly complicated position as while I always strive to

meet the needs of my client, the person wearing the clothes and the person paying for them is usually the same."

"Wait, she already paid you?"

"Payment has been promised in full."

"Forget that," Jason said. "I'm the client, I'm paying you and the only needs you have to meet are mine."

Alejandro opened a door, ushered Jason inside and then followed, closing it behind them.

"That simplifies things for me a great deal," Alejandro said. "I especially do not like serving a client that attempts to employ me as a means to scheme against my clientele."

"It won't be an issue to push back against the royal family?"

"Political favour is for today, Mr Asano. Integrity is forever. If you would be so kind as to go into the measuring stall."

There was what looked like a changing room that Jason stepped into, closing the door behind him.

"Please disrobe down to your underwear for the most accurate measurements," Alejandro said through the door. "Do you have any shape or size-changing powers we need to accommodate?"

"Just some conjured shadow arms," Jason said. "Nothing a normal fit can't handle."

"Excellent. We will have a full range of fabric and cut selection, then. Just let me know when you are ready for measurement, Mr Asano."

"Go ahead, Mr Albericci."

"Please do call me Al."

"Only if you call me Jason."

"It's a deal. You're going to experience some slight tingling."

Light started emitting from the walls of the stall around Jason, starting with cool green, going through blue, purple and then into warm red, yellow and orange before fading away.

"All done, Mr Asano. Jason. Please put your clothes on and come back out."

A few moments later, Jason was back out in the room, which was lined in wall-to-ceiling fabric racks.

"Now there is the matter of what you are looking for," Alejandro said. "What can I do for you today?"

"I'm looking for a full silver-rank wardrobe refresh. I need everything, with plenty of options across the board. Formal, casual, the lot."

“And what kind of budget are we looking at?”

“Whatever it costs.”

“Jason, I think you and I are going to get on very well.”

## Chapter 503

### How Deep a Hole

Jason went down into the waterfall cave beneath his cloud house. The natural stone was hidden behind walls, floor and ceiling made from cloud stuff, leaving only the cave mouth with the water rushing past. Sunshine sparkled through it like a spray of diamonds, dancing into the room. The space was otherwise lit by soft, ambient light coming from the cloud-stuff.

The room was mostly empty, aside from boards formed out of cloud-stuff on the walls. Jason could write or draw on them with only a thought, and they were already full of sophisticated magical diagrams and formulas. While his understanding of astral forces was instinctive and powerful, his knowledge of astral magic theory lagged behind. It had made great leaps, especially over the last year, but it was still not at the level required to finalise his special project.

"I need Clive," he muttered as he glanced across his work. Then he put it out of his mind and a crystal recording projector rose from the middle of the floor. Jason took out a recording crystal and set it in place before stepping back. He sat, a cloud chair emerging from the floor to meet him.

Jason started the projector with a mental command. The projection showed Dawn in the cloud house in Venice, at a point where Jason was in the first transformation zone. Jason had only seen her one time since, shortly before the transformation zone's collapse that had been the only time he saw her true form instead of a weakened avatar.

"Jason," the projected Dawn said. "My dimensional vessel has detected the approach of a similar vessel, belonging to my counterpart within the Builder's people. This is a man I know and, based on my knowledge of him and you, I have some idea of how that is going to go. I'm not sure how far you will end up pushing him, but like so many beings of great power, that power has made him prideful."

Dawn paused as Emi came into the room.

"Dawn, do you want to come play El Grande?"

"I'm a little busy."

"Okay."

Dawn turned back to the recording crystal she was speaking into.

"This man I suspect you are about to meet is going to make a mistake. I could probably stop him, but the concessions we can get from him if I don't are worth more than

preventing him from acting, even if the cost is high. I'll explain the terms I will extract from him now, since we likely won't have long to talk the next time we meet."

Jason listened again as Dawn explained the terms about the Builder not attacking Jason with overwhelming numbers or high-rankers. That he would not send anyone at all unless Jason interfered in their affairs first.

"I did remember right," Jason murmured to himself.

"Since I won't have a lot of time to explain when I see you, I'm going to leave this recording with Farrah. She'll give it to you before you travel once more to the other world. I have no doubt that you'll succeed in saving your world and returning."

The recording ended and Jason got up, returning the crystal to his inventory.

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Like most major organisations in Vitesse, the Adventure Society branch was located in one of the city's iconic garden towers; massive spires draped in greenery. In a meeting room that opened onto a balcony that let in the fresh air, Clive was sitting opposite a high-ranking Magic Society official. Various functionaries were standing behind the official, while Clive was flanked by his team.

"Mr Standish, you are one of the most talented young astral magic specialists we have."

"You don't have me," Clive said. "I left the Magic Society. Definitively."

"It's time to come home. You can accomplish more in research than you ever could as an adventurer."

"I beg to differ," Humphrey said. "Clive was the mastermind behind both finding the Purity enclave and the attack that disrupted their grand summoning."

"And how did he find them?" the official shot back. "By tracing them through a network of dimensional gates that he discovered while cloistered in research at the Magic Society."

"That's an awfully nice way of saying locked up," Sophie said.

"Mistakes were made," the official acknowledged. "We apologise for your previous treatment, Mr Standish."

"Oh, we know how sorry you are," Neil said. "You think we haven't been paying attention?"

"We have been following the career of the woman that exploited Clive," Humphrey said. "Her next promotion got delayed. By months. She got it eventually."

"You Magic Society guys really know how to bring down the hammer," Neil said.

“Mr Standish, this mass-arrival of outworlders represents an unprecedented chance to study astral forces, which is more critical now than ever. We still don’t know if the messengers that were summoned represent an isolated event or part of a widespread program.”

“You wouldn’t even know to ask if Clive wasn’t an adventurer,” Belinda said.

“And that’s the way I’m staying,” Clive added. “Not only did the Magic Society treat me with flagrant indecency but your response in the aftermath was to hush it all up.”

“Whatever unfortunate matters are in the past,” the official said, “we need to look to the future. You are more valuable researching the Builder and Purity’s methods than getting killed fighting some irrelevant monster.”

“I don’t know how to be more explicit,” Clive said. “I’m not returning to the Magic Society. Not ever.”

“You burned that bridge,” Sophie told the official. “Then you took the ashes, put them in a big trough and got a bunch of your Magic Society friends to whiz in it. Then you used the resulting paste to write ‘we gave Clive the hard shaft’ in letters so big that you need to fly to read them.”

Everyone turned to Sophie.

“What she said,” Belinda agreed, throwing an arm around Sophie’s shoulder.

The increasingly disgruntled official was about to speak when he noticed something approaching through the air, directly towards the balcony. It was an elf standing on the back of a giant, white-feathered duck, gliding through the sky. As it reached the balcony, the duck transformed into motes of light that sank into the elf’s hair, turning it from a sandy blond to stark white.

Ken dropped lightly onto the balcony and strode into the room.

“Well?” Humphrey asked.

“It is done.”

Grins crossed the faces of Humphrey and his team.

“What’s done?” the official asked.

“I daresay you shall learn soon enough,” Ken said. “Soon indeed, if the man I hear running down the hall outside is one of yours.”

True to Ken’s word, the meeting room door burst open to admit a harried-looking man in Magic Society robes. He moved up to the official and activated a privacy screen. The team then watched the anxious man rapidly speak, unable to hear his words but seeing the official’s explosive but equally silent reaction. The man shot up from his chair and turned to glare daggers at Humphrey. He didn’t bother to address the team before



storming out of the privacy screen, the startling functionaries trailing like ducklings. They heard him yelling as they moved down the hallway.

“What are Geller Pirates?”

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Warehouse District Three was one of the least lucrative on the island of Livaros. Being the furthest from both the sea and sky docks, it was the closest thing to a criminal district on the very security-conscious island of adventurers. One of the warehouses looked like any other from the outside, although the interior was entirely different, having been converted into an opulent home. Along with the plush furniture and smooth marble, it was further enhanced with magical infrastructure offering a formidable balance of protection and discretion. Only the most powerful senses would notice any difference between the building and the identical-looking ones around it.

Havi Estos was the owner of the building, although it would take an adept bureaucrat to trace it back to him. Pallimustus had nothing on Earth in terms of complex legalities and internecine paperwork, which made those with the knowledge and inclination to use them especially dangerous. Havi was a celestine man of striking appearance. His large physique and onyx-black skin were set off by his hair and eyes of matching gold. He looked well into middle age, despite the anti-aging effects of his silver rank. His aura was free of cores; the legacy of a long-finished adventuring career.

Contrary to his arresting appearance, he was not a man who liked to draw attention. Even so, he did his part during the monster surge, making sure that his activity quota was met. On returning from a contract, he was given a package that had been delivered to one of his public offices. It was from a friend from the old days, Mordant Kerr, who was now living somewhere in the western reaches of the Storm Kingdom.

Inside his office, Havi watched the recording crystal included in the package while reading the letter, his eyes moving back and forth from one to the other. The projection gave a bird’s eye view of a river canyon where a shadowy figure fought monsters swarming over the ground like ants. He watched the projection to the end, his expression unchanging.

“Affliction skirmisher,” he muttered to himself. “Haven’t seen one of those in a long time.”

He called his assistant, Jono, into the room. Jono was also his great-nephew, although Havi tried not to hold it against him.

“Yes, boss?”

“I need you to give Warnock a name.”

“Boss, she wasn’t happy after last time. She’s going to want extra.”

“So pay her extra.”

“Yes, boss. What’s the name?”

“Jason Asano.”

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The capital city of the nation of Estercost was Cyrion, home to the Adventure Society’s continental council. It was closer than Vitesse to the site of the operation that turned into a debacle of magical explosions, summoned messengers and unexpected outworlders. Since the operation had been launched out of Vitesse, that branch of the Adventure Society had been undertaking the initial management. In the aftermath, they were handing off control of the site to the Cyrion branch.

Operations were shifting to Cyrion for two reasons, of which one was simple geography. It had taken place in their backyard and they were better located to handle what was looking like an ongoing operation. The other reason was that the continental council was taking an interest as it turned out to be much more critical than originally thought.

What was initially thought to be a sweep-up operation on low and mid-rank Purity loyalists was revealed to be a grand summoning. Only made possible by the weakened dimensional protection the world suffered during the monster surge, it didn’t take a lot of imagination to consider that it might only be the beginning. If there were more it would have to take place during the monster surge, and after the Adventure Society’s operation forced an early launch, any other locations were likely pressing to do the same. Aggressive investigations were already being set into motion.

The Magic Society had taken charge of the outworlders, more than a hundred of them in total. They were being transported to Cyrion via airship when several other airships moved into formation around them. A single woman with dark olive skin, black hair and a gold-rank aura leapt onto the surrounded airship alone.

A less than satisfied Magic Society official listened to her explain that the Geller family would be providing the accommodation to the outworlders at their fortified estate outside Cyrion. The official did not like the idea.

“While you may be disinclined to go along with this,” Danielle told him, “if you refuse to cooperate, I am going to have to insist. You aren’t going to make me insist, are you?”

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Trenchant Moore was reading through the Adventure Society file of Jason Asano that he hadn’t been given before meeting the man in order to assess him without bias.

Vesper Rimaros was already in the meeting room with him and they were joined by Liara and her team members, Ledev and Jana. Trenchant stood up as Liara entered and she waved him back to his seat. Ledev and Jana politely greeted the other princess.

Rimaros high society thrived on hierarchy. While Vesper and Liara were close friends in private, in public their behaviour was dictated by station. This was restricted to the Rimaros high society, as foreign adventurers and those risen from humble beginnings were hardly expected to understand the sophisticated etiquette protocols.

This inevitably did not stop some from looking down on those not raised in that world. This especially plagued those in the middle rungs who saw people that should be below them not sharing their deference to those above.

When a group was entirely made up of Rimaros locals, things could get complex, even in a simple meeting. The hierarchy of the room was determined by rank and the roles individuals were serving in during any given interaction. As gold rankers, Trenchant, Jana and Ledev stood above the silver-rank Vesper in the social hierarchy but she was also a princess. Liara was a gold-rank princess and nominally held eminence, but Vesper was from a higher branch of the royal family. Trenchant was an explicit servant of the royal family, being a member of the royal guard. He was not on duty, however, and was acting in his capacity as a gold-rank adventurer. Further, he was the oldest and most experienced adventurer in the room.

There was a familiar awkwardness as the people in the room took seats according to their relative positions. Even the fact that most people in the meeting didn't know its purpose affected their standing. Outside of a formal setting, most people defaulted to a respectful politeness of vague equality when the specific protocols were murky.

"If I may ask, your highnesses," Ledev said to Vesper, "why are we here?"

"I need an assessment of Jason Asano's capabilities as an adventurer," Vesper said. "In short, I need to know how far he can be pushed as an adventurer."

"This boy again," Ledev complained, earning him a glare from his sister. He immediately looked contrite.

"I apologise, your highness," he said to Vesper. "I simply fail to see why one silver rank adventurer warrants this much attention. Just look at the people in this room. We represent a powerful, prestigious and valuable force in dangerous and important times. What makes him worth having us gather like this? He's not even in a guild."

"The man himself doesn't matter," Vesper said. "If someone else was in his position, we would be looking at them instead. In fairness to Asano, he never asked or attempted to be in the position he finds himself."

“Quite the opposite, in fact,” Liara said. “While many young adventurers might relish the attention of high-rankers and royalty, he is aggravated by it. He’s had to deal with enough powerful people in the past that the sheen has most certainly worn away. Constantly dealing with those who significantly outmatch you would engender a sense of powerlessness.”

“He certainly isn’t intimidated by gold-rankers,” Trenchant said. “I’m not often spoken to like I’m someone’s flunky. The fact that he immediately saw why I was there and clearly knew more than I only made it worse.”

“He’s arrogant,” Ledev said.

“You said it yourself, Ledev,” Jana told her brother. “Look at the people in this room. If meetings like this were being held about me, I’d be arrogant too.”

“Why are we having this meeting?” Trenchant asked.

“I need an assessment of Asano’s abilities as an adventurer,” Vesper said. “We need to know how far we can push him.”

“Why?” Trenchant asked. “You said he is in some position without actually explaining what that position was.”

“It’s complicated,” Vesper said. “And political.”

“And it’s only made worse because Asano is a valuable asset against the Builder, unrelated to anything else,” Liara added. “His experiences against the Builder and his cult have left him with some unique capabilities.”

“Suffice to say,” Vesper said, “that a very annoying man is at the crux of certain events. Who he is doesn’t matter, only whether he makes a mess or helps us clear it up. What we need right now is to highlight Asano’s capability with some contracts that will get him noticed. Which means knowing how deep a hole we can throw him in with a reasonable expectation of his climbing back out.”

## Chapter 504

### The Part That Knows How to Quit

Princesses Vesper and Liara were in a room with Trenchant Moore and Liara's teammates, Jana and Ledev.

"Let's start with you, Ledev," Liara said. "What is your assessment of Asano?"

"He's capable enough. Guild-level, and strong alone. His aura is... formidable. He excels in solitary action but would be harder to incorporate into a team. His methods are unconventional, for an affliction user."

Trenchant Moore tossed the folder containing Jason's file onto the table.

"This assessment is wrong," he said. "It lists Asano as an affliction-using generalist. He's a specialist."

"You consider him focused enough to be considered an affliction specialist?" Vesper asked.

"He's not an affliction specialist," Trenchant said. "Not as that term is commonly used. What is now called an affliction specialist used to be known as an affliction mage or affliction spellcaster. This is the commonly known approach of standing behind a wall of allies or summons and blanketing the enemy with afflictions from a safe distance."

"That isn't anything like what Asano does," Jana said. "We saw him go through several encounters and while he does use familiars, it's never to put them between himself and the enemy."

"He's an affliction skirmisher," Trenchant said. "Hit and run tactics, high mobility, high efficiency. It's a specialisation that rarely appears and those that have it tend to die early, so it's one you don't often see. Affliction skirmishers have a low margin of error and their survival is all about how well they expand that margin."

"How do they compare to traditional affliction specialists?" Vesper asked. "Are they better? Worse?"

"Like every specialisation, it's a matter of circumstance. The right tool for the job. Since the job is usually standing there and killing a bunch of monsters, I'd judge Skirmisher to be the less useful specialisation. Affliction spellcasters employ much safer strategies and, unless someone takes them out, are obnoxiously effective. They need a team built around them, but they're worth building around. You keep a good affliction spellcaster safe and it doesn't matter what or how much you're up against. They'll take it down eventually. The lead-in time hurts but their efficiency and overall damage output is unparalleled."

“The skirmisher can’t match that?”

“Partially, yes, but they need a broader array of powers, which leaves them with shortfalls. This is why Asano was pegged as a generalist. The biggest weaknesses of a skirmisher are being less effective against large numbers and the need to get in close. That is a high-risk proposition when you aren’t quickly dropping targets like an assassination specialist. That’s the low margin of error I mentioned.”

“There have to be advantages,” Jana said.

“Of course,” Trenchant said. “When what you need are skirmish tactics, a skirmisher is obviously better. A caster is better in standing fights, but not every enemy is so accommodating. Also, solitary hard targets. In the higher ranks, any monster that spawns alone is a significant threat. An affliction caster’s team needs to stand their ground, but dragon or garuda will take them apart before the afflictions do their job.”

There were nods around the table. Rimaros adventurer culture was centred on specialist teams and they all knew the results of sending the wrong team against the wrong threat.

“An affliction skirmisher is fine – and perhaps even best – operating alone,” Trenchant continued. “They can work in teams but are a bad fit for conventional ones and are a bad choice to build a team around. They do best in misfit groups that focus on versatility; the exact opposite of the team-building ethos in Rimaros.”

“Then, their main advantage is survivability?” Vesper asked.

“Yes, although it’s not just about the kind of powers they have. Mentality is key. Affliction skirmishers are used to balancing on a sharp edge, so when things go wrong, they know how to handle it. Everyone at this table knows what to do if you find yourself up against a traditional affliction specialist.”

“You get past the team and hit them,” Ledev said. “Then they’re done.”

“Exactly,” Trenchant agreed. “You know what I’d do if I was up against an affliction skirmisher? I’d run like the goddess of Pain was chasing me. I wouldn’t stand and fight unless I had a full team with me and, even then, I’d want a damn good reason. It’s common knowledge that you have to kill an affliction specialist before they dose you or you’ll die even after you kill them. Skirmishers don’t die easy.”

“So, in short,” Vesper said, “they’re evil bastards.”

“Yes,” Trenchant chuckled. “If you ask me which affliction specialty is more useful, I’ll pick caster every time. It’s low-skill, which means reliable. Just churn through your abilities in the right order and don’t go further forward than the guy with the shield. Affliction skirmishers are like evasion-type defenders. It’s all about judgement, skill and margins of

error, and if they get it wrong, they die. The ones that make it into the higher rank are very, very hard to kill.”

“I believe that,” Ledev said. “I do not like Asano. I don’t like his arrogance and I don’t like his disrespect. But when they made that man, they forgot the part that knows how to quit. We watched him in a fight he couldn’t win. A fight we set him up for, so they knew his powers and they were ready, but he never stopped struggling. Not for a single moment. It wasn’t just blind stubbornness, either. He looked for every edge, seized every advantage that would keep him alive for even a moment longer. I have to respect that kind of determination and resolve. If he fixed his attitude, he could be a fine adventurer.”

“A lot of things have tried to kill Jason Asano,” Liara said. “You can see it in the way he fights. In his aura and his scars.”

“You’ve seen his fully unleashed aura?” Trenchant asked.

“We saw him disable someone just with his aura,” Jana said. “It wasn’t just shock from aura suppression, either. It was like some kind of soul attack. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

“I know the phenomenon you’re describing,” Trenchant said. “Have any of you worked with Amos Pensinata?”

They all shook their heads, although they had all heard of the prominent gold-ranker.

“He’s also suffered soul damage, and he can do things with his aura that other people can’t.”

“Like what?” vesper asked.

“If there’s nothing in Asano’s file about it, I’m not going to say,” Trenchant said. “It’s not my place to tell you other people’s secrets. All this holds true to what I know about affliction skirmishers, though. Traditional training methods hurt them more than help. I’ve only seen a couple of great affliction skirmishers, and that was a long time ago. Both of them fought their way up from humble beginnings, with not much more training than a few months mentored under another adventurer.”

He tapped the file in front of him on the desk.

“That’s what Asano had. Some bronze-rank adventurers showing him the ropes before he got plunged into deep water.”

“In your assessment, then,” Vesper said, “Asano can handle some high-profile contracts?”

“With respect, your highness, you’ve held a politician’s meeting to assess an adventurer. If you want to know if he can handle a contract, give him one. And I’d

recommend that you take one or two yourself. There's a monster surge on and I think you could use the perspective."

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On his way to the Adventure Society campus to see Liara, Jason accidentally opened a portal to the market district teleportation square, instead of the one on campus.

"Oops. Still, I need a few minutes before my portal is available again. I guess I'll have to go check out the local cheeses."

"I am uncertain of who that statement is directed at, Mr Asano," Shade's voice came from Jason's shadow. "You know that you are lying, I certainly don't believe you and even if anyone else were paying attention, I very much doubt they would care."

"Someone's cranky today."

"Gordon made me watch *Gymkata* again."

"Did you lose another bet?"

"I still think he's using those eye orbs to look at my cards, somehow."

"Then you should stop wagering. I thought you learned your lesson after he made you read the novelisation of *Kazaam*."

"Mr Asano, your world has dark and terrible things."

A short while later, Jason was feeding little chunks of fresh meat to the little leech on his shoulder as he moved through the market stalls.

"I want to do a baked brie," Jason said. "I don't know if they have an equivalent here, so I guess I'll just have to buy all the local cheeses I can find and see what I can do with them."

"Shouldn't you restrict yourself to the cheeses that seem the most like brie?" Shade asked.

"Absolutely not. It's a magical world, full of surprises and wonder. What might look like dried figs could actually be some kind of magical brie. I'd best buy anything that looks like dried figs too, I guess. Or fresh figs. You can never be too careful."

"Mr Asano, what happened to going and seeing Princess Liara?"

"We'll get there."

"At the risk of screaming futilely into the void, Mr Asano, you are not being very sensible."

Jason stopped.

"Shade, you're totally right."

"I am?"



“Shade, I’ve been a fool. I’m completely ignoring cheesemongers. I need to go to that boutique shop district where Alejandro’s tailor shop is.”

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“This sucks,” Travis said. “They have flying ships but their long-distance communication is this bad? Don’t they have crystal balls or something?”

“Bro, maybe you could invent a magic phone. Could probably make some money out of it.”

Travis Noble and Taika Williams were on the porch of a guest cottage on a sprawling country estate. The rest of the group were in dormitories that normally held young Gellers in training, but their connection to Jason had earned Taika and Travis preferential treatment.

“I’m not going to be developing anything any time soon,” Travis said. “Most magitech is heavy on the tech and light on the magic because there was always so little magic to work with. Magic was always rough on tech-based comms, which is why people with communication powers were always so useful in proto-spaces. I didn’t expect it to affect purely magical communication as well.”

“Long-distance communication has been the dream of artificers for a long time,” a female voice said. They looked up to see a young woman with a swarthy complexion and short-cropped hair approaching them.

“If you do ever manage to pry open that nut,” she said, “your friend isn’t wrong. You’d earn yourself a fortune. In the meantime, we’re trying to arrange a time where you can talk to Jason using the water-link system. We have our own chambers here on the estate, but we aren’t allowed to use them without permission from the Adventure Society. Too many people use the system all at once and the whole thing fails.”

“Thanks, Henri,” Taika said. “Did you know Jason well?”

“Not very well,” Henrietta said. “He’s on my brother’s team and I did a short training tour with them once. It was long enough to see him do something insane, but that’s never a lengthy wait.”

“What did he do?” Travis asked.

“You ever see that big scar running from his hip and across his abdomen?”

“No,” Travis said.

“Yep,” Taika added.

“He decided to fight a silver-rank monster when he was still iron-rank, the idiot.”

“I’ve heard about this,” Taika said. “He talked about it in his recording crystals. The monster was attacking some village, yeah?”

“That’s right. That was when I learned that guy’s hero fixation was going to get him killed. Didn’t expect him to come back from it, but he always was a bit odd. After him, I thought all you outworlders would be strange, but you’re a pretty normal bunch.”

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Jason was stepping out of a cheesemonger’s when he paused, tilting his head as if trying to hear a faint sound.

“Mr Asano?” Shade asked.

“I felt something,” Jason said. “A gold-ranker, maybe. They tried to take a rummage through my aura but backed off when they sensed me sense them.”

“Should I investigate?”

“If you didn’t sense them, you probably won’t find anything without an aura to track, but go ahead. If you find anyone shady, let me know, but don’t make trouble. That’s my role in this relationship.”

Several dark shapes slipped out of Jason’s shadow and disappeared into the shadows around him.

“Really, Mr Asano?” Shade asked, as several of his bodies discretely moved off.

“Anyone shady?”

“I wasn’t trying to make a pun. If I was, I’d have done better.”

“There is no better with puns, Mr Asano. There is only worse.”

## Chapter 505

### Bad Apples

Jason made his way through the basement levels of the Adventure Society complex until he reached the restricted areas. From there he was escorted to the Builder response unit's area; a series of securely sealed rooms surrounded by powerful aura containment. His escorts led him to Liara's office, where she was sitting behind her desk. She looked up from the report she was reading.

"You can leave him, thank you."

The escorts left them alone, closing the door behind them. She looked Jason over.

"Still no wardrobe update?" she asked.

"Quality takes time. I needed a full wardrobe refresh, after all. Also, I don't think Alejandro appreciated being used for Vesper's games. I can sympathise with his position."

"I was expecting you earlier, Mr Asano. When I ask people to attend me, I am used to them being prompt."

"I'll bet you are. You didn't specify a time and I had work to do."

"Work? You've already been to the jobs hall? There's a contract is waiting for you, which is what I called you in to tell you."

"No, not that," Jason said with a dismissive gesture. "I'm a whole new part of a whole new world. Do you have any idea what it's like trying to learn an entirely new spice palate? And that's before you even look at magical ingredients."

"Are you talking about cooking?"

"It's kind of my thing, and I've been locked out for a while. There have been severe food shortages in my world."

The mention of Jason's world arrested Liara's retort. On top of ordinary curiosity, whatever Jason had been involved in during his time away was clearly impacting events on his return. She knew that Soramir would not want her to miss any chance to learn more.

"Why were there food shortages?"

"I was looking at hosting a dinner party where we could talk all about my time away," Jason said. "I can't very well do that until I get a handle on the local ingredients, though. My cheese enchiladas went a bit wrong and they should have been nice and simple. But if I shouldn't be wasting my time on that kind of thing, I guess it'll have to wait."

She gave him a thin-lipped smile.

"You're very good at finding where to stick the dagger, aren't you, Mr Asano?"

"I've found that I need to be, Princess. I was getting ready to come see you when I got your message, by the way. I thought I might be able to help with your interrogation of the Purity loyalists."

"We will call on you at need. It's too early to put you in a room with them."

"You're not torturing them, are you?"

"Torture is unreliable. Other methods take longer, but get to the actual truth."

"Other methods?"

"We use alchemical methods and ritual magic to induce a trance-like state where they are more open to suggestion. It still takes time and care to get past wilful resistance, especially with zealots. It's a delicate process, which means no amateurs bumbling around. We'll only need you once we have what we want from trance interrogation and we're back to questioning them in their right minds."

"You don't get everything from this truth-hypnosis thing you've got going on?"

"The trance state is good for details, but not for interpretation. For that, it's just ordinary interrogation, which the trance questioning helps prepare for. That's when we can use you; to change things up. Unbalance them."

"I'm not looking to step on anyone's toes," Jason said. "Just let me know when you need me. I do have some information that I thought might be helpful, though."

"Then please share."

Liara gestured to a seat opposite her desk and Jason sat.

"I was just checking my own records about the restrictions the Builder was placed under in terms of having me killed off."

"You have records?"

"A crystal recording left by a benefactor."

"I don't suppose...?"

"No."

"Worth a try. Checking the details is a good idea, though, and I appreciate it. There has been an order of the Purity church in this region for many years, but knowing everything we can about why your presence has made them active will no doubt be helpful."

"That's the thing," Jason said. "I don't think I am the reason they're active. I know it seems like everything is about me, but that's just a trap people fall into because of my wild charisma, rakish charm and dashing good looks."

Liara gave him a flat look and he flashed an impish grin.

"I think when you leaked the information about my delivery run," he continued, "I was just a target of opportunity. I think Purity's henchfolk are up to something bigger than just handling me."

"Why is that?"

"One of the requirements that have to be met before the Builder's lackeys can come after me is that I have to interfere in their affairs before they're allowed to take their shot."

Liara leaned back in her chair, tapping her chin thoughtfully.

"But they ambushed you. Is it that they're Purity followers and not the Builder's own people, so the restrictions are lesser?"

"I don't think the person that set the terms would leave that big a loophole. Otherwise, he'd just throw a squillion bucks at some gold-ranker with no scruples to come and off me. And you were there. The Purity people made a point of how they were adhering to the stipulations."

"They did," Liara said, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "But they didn't mention anything about this interference clause."

"Exactly, which is why I went and double-checked. I think they were able to come after me because I was interfering with their business."

"You were on a delivery contract. How is that interfering in their business?"

"There's been some attrition with the adventurers on supply contracts, right? The non-guild adventurers are competitive, but they also look out for one another. I'm new at this and I've already heard the talk."

"Everything is stretched thin," Liara said. "People, assets, resources. We've been in a state of semi-readiness for so long that it's all strained. Plus, this monster surge is already showing itself to be heavier than normal. The whole region will usually see one, maybe two diamond-rank monsters in an entire surge. The first week we had one attack Rimaros and another to the south, just inland of the Storm Kingdom's borders."

"I thought the same thing," Jason said. "Not enough people, too much danger. But what if that's not all there is? What if Purity is using the fact that things are slipping through the cracks to enact some plot? If they were already intercepting adventurers on delivery contracts, then ambushing me wasn't a violation of the restrictions. It was me getting involved in what they were already up to."

Liara frowned and Jason waited in silence while she considered what he'd told her. Then she opened a drawer in her desk and took out a file, setting it in front of Jason.

"Your team," she said, "is apparently just as good at locating themselves in the middle of a huge mess as you. They also had a run-in with the Purity church."

Jason took the file and started reading it over while Liara waited. He finished, setting the file back on the desk.

“Messengers, outworlders... the Adventure Society is going to want me to go there.”

“The Adventure Society branches in Vitesse and Cyrion have already requested you be sent, yes,” Liara said. “The Adventure Society Director here has declined, instead requesting that your team be brought to you. Along with Miss Hurin's parents, as a courtesy.”

“Why bring all them here when events are taking place there? Please tell me it isn't just because of the politics.”

“His ancestral majesty feels that—”

“Are you talking about Soramir?”

“I am speaking of him, yes. With respect.”

“It's a funny thing, respect. It's a word that a lot of people – people on the higher end of the social strata – use because it sounds better than subservience. Even when you're talking about actual respect, why do you get to tell me what's respectful? I come from a whole other world and a much lower social class. In my culture, friendliness is respectful and being impersonal is cold and hostile. I get it; this is your town, so your rules. But if you and Soramir came to my town, would you follow my rules? My etiquette?”

“He is a diamond-ranker, Mr Asano. He was a king. The first king of this nation and founder of the Rimaros dynasty.”

“And I'm a child of farmers and immigrants. Does that make me any less worthy of respect? Anecdotal evidence says yes because your family has not treated me with respect. You've used me and exploited me. You act like Zara's actions were an embarrassment but you've treated me the exact same way she did, and at least she thought she wasn't hurting anyone. Your family dragged me into this, and what have you done since? Dangled me like a fish on a hook, leaving me oblivious. Calling me to heel? Telling me how to act and how to dress? I'm not your child, I'm not your dog and I'm not your bait, Princess.”

Jason stood up from his chair.

“Perhaps you should calm down, Mr Asano, before you say something you regret.”

“Remember that time you sold me out to the Purity church and I told you that I'd get some rest and then say something stupid? Well, this is it, Princess, so buckle in. What did I do to deserve the way I've been treated by you and yours? Not be powerful enough to tell you all to bugger off? I met one of you once, so now you get to own me? Unless I'm not making it clear, if I get one more of you royal pricks making off-hand comments about

respect while showing me none at all, then you are going to find out exactly why there are diamond-rankers, gods and great astral beings on my big list of enemies, yet I'm still here. The Builder came for my soul, then he killed me, in person, but I'm still here and he's still trying. You think I'm scared of royalty? You've got it arse-backwards, Princess. You should be scared of me."

"You're a silver ranker threatening one of the greatest powers in the world. You sound like a child throwing a tantrum. Is that how you think you'll get respect?"

"I am a child, by your standards and I'm way past anticipating respect from the likes of you. Why would it suddenly start now? All I ever seem to deal with are people more powerful than me and I can count the ones who showed me respect without running out of fingers. Why are you the one asking for respect when I'm the one pulled into this mess by your family? All you've ever treated me as is a tool. A tool that you need to handle. Well, guess what, Princess? The handle on this tool just got very slippery, so you need to be careful next time you go to grab it."

Liara didn't say anything, knowing it would just provoke another tirade. She waited in silence for his mood to calm as they stared at each other over the desk. There were undulations in his aura as it radiated pent-up fury. She could sense the festering nature of it, long-predating his arrival in Rimaros. She could tell that his eruption had been building up for some time and he needed to get it out. If anything, the release would make him easier to work with for having vented his frustration, so long as she let his outburst slide and didn't provoke him further.

"You're right, Mr Asano. My family has not treated you with the respect due to an innocent person drawn into our problems through no fault of their own. I apologise for that. Perhaps, if you sit back down, we can discuss rectifying that."

Jason stared at her a long time before retaking his seat.

"That... wasn't entirely directed at you," Jason said softly. "Don't get me wrong; some of it definitely was, but that ship had a lot of momentum. You just happened to be in the way."

"I don't know what you've been through, Mr Asano. You do deserve respect, if for no better reason than I'm certain that one day you are going to be gold rank, perhaps even diamond. His ancestral... Soramir believes that you have spent your entire adventuring career up against forces that you have no business facing, but perhaps had no choice but to face. I don't know what he saw in your aura because he does respect your privacy enough to not tell me."

“But not enough to not take a look. Your family is just one more in a long line of enemies.”

“We aren’t your enemies, Mr Asano, and we don’t want to be.”

“You’re not the first enemy to tell me that. You’re not the first group to screw me over and then say ‘hey, that was just a few bad apples, not the whole organisation.’ Then they shaft me again. And again. It never goes quite the way they want and they always say the same thing, over and over. I know who you are. You’re the reasonable person standing at the front while the people behind you sharpen their knives.”

“What can we do to earn your trust, Mr Asano?”

“Try a big wooden horse full of soldiers.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means that it doesn’t matter what you do. Even if it’s an earnest gesture, all I’ll ever see is another attempt to manipulate me. I’ve been burned too many times to find new people to trust. You want to do something for me, Princess, then do what Soramir said he would in the first place. Bring the people I already trust to here or send me to them.”

“If you want to go to Vitesse or Cyrion, you can. We’ll make that happen for you. But, as I was saying, his ancestral majesty believes that it’s better for you and us if you’re free and active. If you go, you’ll be put in a room with the Magic Society’s astral researchers and spend your days answering questions about outworlders. Danielle Geller has already snatched up the outworlders and spirited them off to one of the Geller estates, so her political capital is spent right now. She can’t protect you from that. But here, you’ll be given the freedom to act.”

“Within the bounds set by your family.”

"My family rule this kingdom. What do you want, Asano? To be above the law?"

“You are.”

"The walls around me may be different from the ones around you, but they are no less real. Don't pretend you're too stupid to know that's true."

Jason nodded, acknowledging the point.

“You’re saying that if I leave the Storm Kingdom, I’ll still have powerful people jerking me around. But here I have some leverage because you need my active participation.”

“Exactly. If you can’t trust us, trust that we’ll act in our own best interests. Right now, our interests require your cooperation, not your capitulation.”

“And here I thought Vesper was the politically adroit one.”



"I was raised with the same tutoring she was. It's just that she actually likes politics. I don't like the compromises. I don't like looking someone in the eye and telling them a lie that will hurt them. I like knowing who the bad people are and that it's not me."

Jason nodded again, and then spoke, his voice soft and gentle.

"It doesn't feel good to be great at something you don't want to do, but have to."

"No, it doesn't," she agreed. "How about this, Mr Asano? I'll try to do more asking and less telling. I'll talk to Vesper, but no promises, there. It's not much, but perhaps it can be a start. The first step on a path towards mutual respect."

Jason nodded.

"We'll see."

He tapped the file on the desk in front of him.

"I have questions."

"Go ahead."

"You requested my team be sent here. Was that approved?"

"The request is pending. The actions of the Geller family have complicated things."

"The outworlders. They're all from my world?"

"That appears to be the case. They all seem to know you."

"Do I know any of them?"

"I believe so. We're trying to get a list of names to answer that exact question, but things are complicated with the Geller family placing them under protection. It seems there is some contention between your team and the Magic Society. The Gellers intervened to prevent the outworlders being used for research."

"Good. I heard how the Magic Society treated one of my team members from Rufus Remore, although maybe the whole organisation isn't so bad. Maybe it was just a few bad apples."

"I suggest reaching out to the Geller family here in Rimaros. Perhaps they might provide a better line to the outworlders."

"There are Gellers here in Rimaros?"

"There are Gellers everywhere, Mr Asano. You'd have to ask the church of Fertility about that."