

Chapter 83: It Makes No Difference to the Ant

Jason spotted Phoebe Geller as he was walking through the grounds of the Adventure Society campus. She gave him a wave and approached.

"There's an expedition being set up to go after that sand barge," she told him after they exchanged greetings. "We're going to find out what the Ustei tribe are doing this far south and stop them from raiding any more spirit coin shipments. It's a big group, with a silver rank in charge. Want me to get you on the list?"

"Absolutely," Jason said.

She flashed him a pretty smile.

"I'll give Humphrey the details; he'll find you."

"I don't doubt it," Jason said.

They parted ways and Jason entered the administration building. Albert was on the front desk, directing Jason to a part of the building he'd never been in before. He arrived at what looked like an outer office, with an official seated behind a desk, next to a door that led further on. The woman was reading a book, glancing up as Jason came in. She glanced down at a sheet of paper on her desk.

"Mr Asano?" she asked, with a friendly smile.

"That's me," he said.

"It shouldn't be long," she said. "Please take a seat."

"Thanks."

She gestured to a pair of chairs up against the wall, one of which was occupied by an attractive young elf woman. Her appearance was quite different from Anisa, who looked like Nazis had grown her in a lab. This elf had the same willowy figure, but tawny skin and vibrant green eyes. Chestnut hair spilled down over her shoulders. Her clothes were in the loose-fit, local style. Jason had been around enough now to spot the quality make and materials, but they were simple and didn't flaunt their undoubtedly expensive price.

She was looking him over in turn and gave him a smile as he sat down next to her. He had met enough elves by this point to recognise her age at eighteen or nineteen, which meshed with her iron rank aura.

"Jason Asano," he said as he sat down, offering his hand to the elf, who shook it.

"I know," she said. "I've seen the recording of you taking Rick Geller's team apart."

Jason groaned.

"I'm not as good as that recording makes out," Jason said. "That situation was weighted very heavily in my favour. Also, I don't have evil powers."

She laughed.

"You went one against five with a Geller family team," she said. "Some would argue that no situation could be weighted heavily enough."

"The circumstances always matter," Jason said. "We have a saying where I come from: better lucky than good. Luck has saved my life more than once."

"Sounds like an exciting life," she said. "I'm Beth Cavendish, by the way."

"The excitement is a new development," Jason said. "Are you related to Mose Cavendish?"

"My cousin," she said, nodding at the door next to the desk. "I'm waiting for him now. He says good things about you, by the way."

"That's very nice of him," Jason said. "I was really impressed by that crazy vortex power of his."

"He mentioned you were a bit odd. Something about being from another world, and also, cannibals."

"That would be the exciting new development I mentioned."

"Is that how you became involved with Rufus Remore?" she asked.

"It was," Jason said. "You know Rufus?"

"He conducted my field assessment," she said.

"He didn't fail you, did he?"

"No," she said, with a confident smile. "He passed my whole team."

"Your whole team? He only gave six people a pass, right?"

"Four of which were my team," she said. "The others were those two who follow Thadwick Mercer around. Such a waste of talent."

"Rufus said the same thing," Jason said. "Is Mose on your team?"

"No," Beth said. "Mose is a little inconsistent to pass a Rufus Remore assessment. He's great when everything is going right, but needs a little help when things get sticky."

The door next to the woman at the desk opened to admit Mose Cavendish into the room, looking rather flustered. Jason and Beth both stood up.

"Jason?" Mose said.

"G'day, Mose."

"You can go in now, Mr Asano," the woman behind the desk said.

"No worries," Jason told her, nodding to Beth.

"Lovely to meet you, Beth Cavendish," he said. "Always a pleasure, Mose."

They made quick farewells and Jason went through the door. On the other side was a chamber that looked similar to a courtroom, but one that was almost empty. There was a long, high judge's bench, but all the seating for lawyers, prosecutors, plaintiffs and gallery were replaced with a solitary chair in the centre of the room.

Three people were already sitting behind the bench. In the middle was the director of the Adventure Society, the elf, Elspeth Arella. Jason had only spoken with her the once, although he had spotted her from time to time at social events. To her left was Vincent, who Jason had last seen doing the walk of shame from the suite across the hall. To her right was another elf, an elderly woman. All three of them were looking at him with blank expressions.

Jason looked around, then plopped down in the chair.

"We didn't say you could sit," the elderly elf said.

Jason gave her a casual nod of acknowledgement.

"You're forgiven," he said, her lips thinning as she heard his response.

"I have found that people in your position tend to show us respect," the woman said.

"And I find people in your position," Jason countered, "tend to confuse respect with obedience. Would you rather I come in here acting the way I think you want me to act?"

He gestured to himself.

"What you see is what you get. Do you think dishonesty is more respectful than the truth?"

Vincent was rolling his eyes, while Elspeth Arella's eyes twinkled with amusement.

The woman asking the questions remained stony-faced.

"How would you rate your performance in the group contract you undertook two days ago?" the woman asked, the others still silent.

"Critically poor," Jason said.

"Explain, she asked.

"My inability to keep my big mouth shut cost the team thirty percent of its personnel, including the healer. As such, we engaged in multiple combat situations with crucial absences."

"You acknowledge responsibility for the altercation with Thadwick Mercer that led him and his team to refuse the contract at the last minute?" she asked.

"Yes," Jason said.

"Full responsibility?"

"Yes."

"You don't lay any of this on Thadwick Mercer?"

"Thadwick is what he is, and doesn't know any better. I do, which made it my responsibility to be the bigger person for the sake of team cohesion. Instead, I chose to be small and petty."

The woman looked at the other two. The way they conversed with glances alone showed their close, working relationship. The woman turned back to Jason.

"How would you rate your performance on this mission otherwise?" she asked.

"Adequate," he said.

"Explain," she said.

"We encountered multiple combats and the team handled them effectively. There weren't any shirkers; everyone did their part, myself included."

"You argued against eliminating the threat posed by the Ustei tribe."

"The job was to deliver coins, not get in a fight against unknown odds."

"Overcoming superior numbers is a specialty of yours, is it not?" she asked. "You are aware of a widely disseminated recording of you in the Geller family's mirage arena."

"If you thought that edited recording was a valid basis on which to assess me," he said, "then you wouldn't be qualified to assess me at all."

Again the three of them shared a conversation of glances.

"You were recently assigned a contract to clear out an infestation of rats in Old City," she said.

"Stone-chewer rats, yes," Jason said.

"Your report stated that you killed all the rats," she said.

"That isn't accurate," Jason said.

"Your report wasn't accurate?"

"No, your characterisation of my report wasn't accurate," he said. "My report stated that all the rats were killed, not that they were all killed by me. A number were killed by an additional monster, a rat gorgon."

"But you are certain all the rats were killed?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"I have an ability that helps me keep track of certain aspects of my activities."

"What is the nature of this ability?"

"My own business."

They locked eyes as he felt her bronze rank aura press down on him. He held her gaze as his own aura was completely suppressed.

“What if I told you that there were still stone-chewer rats being found in Old City?” she asked.

“Two scenarios come to mind as being most likely,” Jason said. “One would be a second rat colony having spawned. The other would be that you’re trying to shake my confidence that the original colony was eliminated fully. Which you have not.”

Jason spotted Vincent nodding to himself.

“You did not request a bonus payment after encountering the rat gorgon,” the woman said.

“That’s correct,” Jason said.

“You haven’t requested a bonus for any of the contracts and adventure board notices you have completed. Several of which would certainly have been approved.”

“I’m not concerned with a few spirit coins here or there,” Jason said. “If I do enough to warrant an awakening stone, I imagine someone will tell me.”

“You’ve been undertaking contracts at a rapid pace,” the woman said. “If not for money, then why?”

“I’ve been told I need to get stronger for what is to come.”

“By Rufus Remore?” she asked.

“He has been telling me to get stronger,” Jason said, “but I was actually thinking of someone I met at the temple of knowledge.”

A powerful aura washed over the room, visibly alarming the panel.

“Name dropper,” a female voice whispered, somehow both quiet enough to feel intimate and loud enough to fill the chamber.

“Do you mind?” Jason asked the empty air. “I’m kind of in the middle of a thing, here.”

With a chuckle, the aura vanished. The three panellists stared wide-eyed at Jason.

“Sorry,” he apologised, with a helpless shrug. “She has privacy issues.”

Vincent and the elderly elf turned to the director sitting between them.

“What is your relationship with the goddess of knowledge?” the director asked him, speaking for the first time since he came in.

“The same as my relationship with you, Director. She’s more powerful than I am, we had a nice chat one time and she’s apparently keeping an eye on me.”

“You seem unconcerned about having the attention of a goddess,” the director said.

“You can squash an ant with a boot or by dropping a building on it,” Jason said. “It makes no difference to the ant. Having her attention is no different to having yours.”

“You seem to be taking it calmly,” she said.

“That’s a skill I’ve developed,” he said.

"Taking things calmly?" she asked.

"No, seeming to. It's possible I just peed a little."

She looked at him incredulously as Vincent hung his head. The director glanced at the other two, the elderly elf gave a firm nod, while Vincent's was more reluctant.

"Approach the bench, please, Mr Asano," the director said.

Jason stood up and walked over. The bench came up his neck height, the panel on a raised platform behind it.

"Badge please," the director said. He took his Adventure Society badge in its leather wallet out from his inventory, reaching up to place in on the bench. The director opened the wallet and touched a black stone to it. He couldn't see what was happening, but she shortly handed it back.

"Here you are," she said, handing back the wallet. He looked down at the badge, where the single star under the adventure society emblem had been joined by a second.

"A second star means you will be held to a higher standard," the elderly elf said.

"Don't repeat the kind of mistake you made with Thadwick Mercer."

"Call it a lesson learned," he said.

"From now on you can take one or two-star missions from the jobs hall," Vincent told him. "Try not to make an idiot of yourself."

"I can do my best with the two-star jobs," Jason said, "but making an idiot of myself is kind of my thing."