

Chapter 601

This Doesn't Feel Glorious

There was a rocky outcropping on the southern mainland, well beyond the border of Storm Kingdom territory. Towering over the jungle, it overlooked a sweeping river and was an excellent landmark to portal to. A portal opened as someone did just that, and adventurers started emerging. Emerging first were silver rank guild adventurers, followed by Princess Liara and, finally, a visibly nervous Autumn Leal.

Autumn looked around at the guild team assigned to watch over her familiar ritual. They were from the Sapphire Crown guild, whose bronze-rankers wouldn't give her a second glance on the street, even with her silver rank. They would be polite if they ever spoke to her, sure, but why would they? And all of that was ignoring the gold-rank princess.

Liara directed them to start descending the outcropping.

"Don't think about them," Liara told Autumn in a calming voice. "My understanding is that if you aren't looking to attract certain varieties of carnivore, a calm mind is best for familiar rituals."

"I don't understand what's going on," Autumn said. "I mean, I understand why I'm here, but why are you here?"

"Mr Asano was unhappy that people coming after him were going to disrupt your familiar ritual, so he told me to take you to another site while he explains things to the people in question."

"He can tell *you* to do things?"

"No, but it doesn't seem to stop him."

She didn't point out that he also told the Builder to do things, which was really how they ended up in their current circumstances.

"Mr Asano's aura is rather strong," Liara continued. "Strong enough that even I can't read his emotions. So when enough anger slipped through that I picked up on it, it was worth paying attention to. It meant he was probably going to do something drastic, and knowing there was no stopping him, I thought to it best to steer him as best I could. Fortunately, there are procedures for this."

"For what, exactly?"

"After every monster surge, there's a lot of guild recruitment as quality adventurers the guilds overlooked demonstrate their ability. Many great adventurers come from outside of the guild and aristocratic families, and the surge is where a lot of them get noticed.

Unfortunately, every surge also brings adventurers that failed to distinguish themselves but are unwilling to accept that. They pick someone who did and try to make an example of them. Watching out for this very thing is how we caught wind of what was happening with you and stepped in. Asano is, after all, such an obvious target.”

“But even with moving my ritual, won't they still go after Jason?”

“Yes. Standard procedure is to warn whomever they've targeted, and then let them. We've found that letting people bite down on the rock is the most effective object lesson.”

Autumn nodded.

“I know you're only helping me because of Jason, but I'm still not sure how I ended up here. How did I go from standing next to him in line for a scutwork delivery job to all this?”

She gestured at the other adventurers and Liara herself.

“That was Asano's choice.” Liara explained. “I've studied Asano's history as extensively as anyone can, I suspect. He has a habit of going a long way for relative strangers, especially if he feels that they've been wronged on account of his actions. You have met his team members, Wexler and Callahan?”

“Sophie and Belinda? Yes.”

“They were thieves when they met Asano. He and Clive Standish caught them on a contract, only to discover they were passing them off into a fate much worse than thievery warranted. It was quite political, very corrupt and extremely unpleasant. Asano undertook actions I can only describe as characteristically drastic and two thieves went from a disastrous fate to elite adventurers. Asano made some rather significant enemies in the process and ultimately paid a hefty price, but I don't believe he regrets it. Despite a cost I'm not sure I can even empathise with the severity of.”

“Is he going to pay a cost for helping me?”

“Not unless, as I said, he's overestimated himself. You met Asano on a fortress town delivery?”

“Yes, but it was clear things weren't normal. There was a gold ranker on board, and not just an ordinary one. He said it was because of pirates, but you don't send the Siege Sword to guard a supply run from pirates that could be anywhere. He was there to test Jason.”

“Yes, he was,” Liara agreed. “I'm afraid that I am ultimately the reason for your acquaintance with Asano. I put him on that airship, although it was his Ancestral Majesty who assigned Trenchant Moore. I was using Asano as bait to catch some Builder cultists.”

“His Ancestral Majesty, as in...”

“Soramir Rimaros, yes.”

Liara looked at Autumn.

“I’m not helping you calm down, am I, Miss Leal?”

“Not really, no. Did you catch the Builder cultists?”

“We got Purity zealots instead. There’s no shortage of people willing to go after Asano, which is what has brought us to this predicament. There are only a handful of regions ideal for seeking out familiar-appropriate magical frogs, which is why we had to portal you to a more distant one. The one you were registered to visit is currently crawling with opportunists about to find that their opportunity is eagerly awaiting them.”

Eleven people were moving through the jungle on the Storm Kingdom’s western mainland. They were in a region hosting a major habitat for magical frogs, around a dozen kilometres from one of the main roadways that Jason had once travelled down on a delivery contract. This was where Autumn Leal had registered as going to perform her familiar bond ritual. It was also the place where two men, Rangel and Tellez, had led their teams.

“And to think you said this helmet wasn’t worth the money, Tellez.”

“It wasn’t worth the money, Rangel.”

“We aren’t the only ones out here, searching for Asano. This helmet will track him down.”

“Assuming he doesn’t have some way to block tracking magic. There are plenty of items and abilities that can do that.”

“The artificer who sold it to me said it would penetrate those kinds of protections.”

“People say all kinds of things, Rangel. My wife said she’d never leave me.”

“Didn’t she leave that alchemy vendor for you?”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying there’s a pattern of behaviour.”

“What kind of pattern is leaving me for a guy who sells umbrellas?”

“Ella left you for an umbrella salesman?”

“During a monster surge, no less. And they aren’t even magical umbrellas. They’re regular umbrellas!”

Rangel and Tellez were moving through the jungle with their team members in tow. They were hunting Jason Asano, and knowing he would have his own team with them, had grouped together. They had checked and found that Asano’s absurdly named Team Biscuit had six, giving them almost two-to-one odds. Not everyone was on-board with the plan, however, and the singular woman in the group spoke up.

“Tellez, we could still back out of this,” she told her team leader.

“Escamilla, you were outvoted.”

“There’s a Geller on Asano’s team.”

“Not one of the local ones; I’ve never heard of him. And not every Geller is so amazing. Their reputation is overblown.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” Escamilla said. “And Gellers don’t usually let just anyone on their team.”

“I haven’t heard of anyone on this one’s team,” Rangel contributed. “Except Asano.”

“Who you hadn’t heard of before,” Escamilla pointed out. “Just because they aren’t known locally doesn’t make them weak.”

“You’re just looking for reasons to not do this,” Tellez told her.

“You’re right. We’re roaming through the jungle, interrupting some poor woman’s familiar ritual to beat the hell out of a fellow adventurer just for the glory. This doesn’t feel glorious, Tellez.”

“Stop griping. We agreed to this as a team.”

“I did some checking around, Tellez. This woman lost her familiar defending Rimaros from the Builder attack.”

“We all defended the city from the Builder attack,” Rangel said.

“Our teams were on standby on Provo, Rangel,” Escamilla said. “We weren’t exactly beating back the cult.”

“Which is why we’re here,” Rangel said. “To get the prestige that was denied us when we were assigned away from the battle.”

“I don’t think it was prestige that we were denied,” Escamilla said. “I think it was casualties. A lot of people died that day. Stronger people than us.”

“That’s what you think, isn’t it?” Tellez asked. “That Asano’s team is stronger than us?”

“I don’t know, Tellez,” she said. “That’s kind of the whole point: we don’t know what we’re walking into. I told you I did some checking around, and I spoke to Team Work Saw.”

“Team Work Saw aren’t worth a damn,” Rangel said.

“They’re a guild team,” Escamilla said.

“Yeah, the worst guild team in Rimaros,” Rangel said. “We could take them easy.”

“I don’t think we should go underestimating any guild team, Rangel,” Tellez said.

“What did you get from them, Milla?”

“They’ve worked with Asano’s team. Said they’re a strange group, but serious business.”

“What did they say about Asano himself?”

“The usual stuff. Don’t mess with an affliction specialist. They said he was kind of an odd one, though. He—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rangel said. “Affliction specialists are nothing. You just punch past their protection and put them down fast.”

“And how many affliction specialists have you ‘put down fast’ Rangel?” Escamilla asked.

“First time for everything.”

In a nearby shadow, Jason was starting to wonder if this entire conversation was some kind of ruse to lure him into a false sense of security.

“That’s what makes this such a good plan,” Tellez said, gesturing at the recording crystal floating over his head. Rangel had an identical one. “We don’t have to fight Asano’s team. Not really. We have the numbers to tie them up long enough to give Asano a beat down. He’s silver rank, so he can take it. And then we disengage and get out. They’re looking for monsters and magical beasts interrupting the ritual, not a sneak attack from two teams of elite adventurers. We blitz, beat, and bolt.”

“Yes, because that’s what elite adventurers do,” Escamilla said. “They record themselves attacking a fellow adventurer for no better reason than to build their reputations. Do you think there won’t be any repercussions from this?”

“We want the repercussions from this,” Tellez said. “Footage of us kicking the goo out of the guy everyone is talking about at the top end of town, the people they’ll be talking about is us. Recrimination from the Adventure Society will only help raise our profile. He has a healer, Milla. No one will be suffering anything that can’t be fixed with a few minutes and a few spells, so it won’t be that bad. We take our lumps and come out the talk of the town.”

“Even assuming that this all goes the way you think it will,” Escamilla said, “I’m not so sure I want to be the subject of that kind of talk. And don’t think it will go just right. When has everything gone just right on a contract, let alone this mess? If we want to end up in the upper echelons of adventurers, Tellez, we can’t be stuck on basic monster hunts, which means star ratings with the Adventure Society. Every famous team is full of two-stars, and most have at least one member with three. We have one member with two stars. Me. But when what we’re doing here comes out – however it goes – my second star is going away. You aren’t afraid of getting demoted because you’re already sitting on one star, but I’m the one with something to lose.”

Tellez stopped walking and turned on Escamilla.

“And there it is,” he said. “Short-term thinking is one thing, but the real problem is that it’s all about you, isn’t it? The unwillingness to sacrifice for the team. The selfishness.”

Escamilla didn’t back off, getting in the face of the man, despite being a head shorter.

“Don’t talk to me about selfishness, Tellez. This whole thing is the embodiment of selfishness. How many people are you willing to hurt to advance yourself? This woman just trying to get a familiar? The team of adventurers we’re attacking? They don’t know about your plan, Tellez, so they won’t be playing for fun. When we hit them, they’re going to hit back. Hard. And not just today, either. We’re making enemies here that we don’t have to.”

Rangel and Tellez loomed over the smaller woman.

“You don’t like it, Escamilla,” Rangel said, “then how about you turn around and go home? We can live without one more damage dealer. If you wanted to have people put up with your crap, you should have gone for guarding or healing powers.”

Escamilla looked to Tellez, waiting, but he said nothing.

“Seriously?” she asked, after a long, tense silence. “You’re going to let an outsider tell a member of *your* team to go and not say a single word in their defence?”

Tellez took on an awkward expression, but then firmed it with resolve.

“You agreed to go along with the team’s decision, Milla.”

“I never thought the team would be this insane!”

“Then why come along at all?”

“Because you’re my team! And I thought that maybe, just maybe, I could convince you to give up on this idiotic plan of yours, Tellez.”

“Actually, it was my plan,” Rangel said. “Well, it was Maldonado’s plan, but I’m the one who stole it. And if we’re going to find Asano before he does, we need to stop standing around yelling at one another and get back to the search. If Asano and his team are anywhere near here, they’ve heard us coming.”

Escamilla glared at him but didn’t respond before turning her gaze back to Tellez.

“If we want to make a name for ourselves,” she asked, “how about we do it with accomplishments instead of stunts?”

“We don’t have enough accomplishments, Milla! The guilds are going to be recruiting now the surge is over, but we didn’t do anything that will stand out. We can’t get into a top guild if no one knows who we are.”

“Look at what we’re doing, Tellez! You think this – *this* – is what great adventurers do?”

“Asano isn’t so great, and his name is on everyone’s lips right now. That’s what makes him the perfect target.”

“We don’t know what Asano is,” she told him. “But what he’s not is out in the jungle, targeting other adventurers to make some kind of point.”

In a nearby shadow, Jason winced, scratching his head awkwardly.

“All this has done is show us who we really are,” Escamilla said. “Every other group that we’re racing to find Asano is the same as us; they’re either in middling guilds or none at all. Maybe the reason we didn’t get the attention of a big guild, Tellez, is that we’re not meant to be in one. Maybe what this whole debacle is really telling us is that this is all we amount to.”

Escamilla felt the atmosphere change and knew she’d made a mistake as the auras around her grew hostile. For the first time since being empowered by essences, she was acutely conscious of being a woman. She was the only one on either team, leaving her in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by men. She stood, tense, unease creeping into her mind when screams rang out as a member of Rangel’s team was dragged into the canopy.

Chapter 602

El Demonio Que Hace Trofeos de los Hombres

The adventuring teams led by Rangel and Tellez were in dense jungle. With eleven members in the combined group, it was necessary to cut a path, but magic was more than up to the task. One of Rangel's team members, Barrera, had been doing so with a conjured blade-whip that made short work of anything from thick scrub to entire trees.

Sunlight speckled in through the canopy above, vesting the two teams in false twilight as they stopped to argue over their current endeavour. Both teams had turned on a member of Tellez's team, Escamilla, when Barrera was suddenly hauled into the canopy, screaming. He was held in place by a swarm of shadowy arms, but they were more numerous than strong. Barrera was wrenching himself free, despite more arms emerging to snatch at him.

Barrera's panicked screaming turned into more of an intermittent yell until he finally yanked himself free and dropped to the ground. The others saw that he had wounds from a weapon scored into his back, sliced into the weaker fabric around the stiffer panels of his armour. The cuts were shallow, to the point that the natural recovery of a silver ranker should have closed them, but they were freely bleeding too-dark blood.

"Poison," Rangel said bitterly. "Carilo, cleanse him."

When no answer came, he looked around.

"Carilo?"

The silence magic that had been on the throwing dart that struck Carilo was not especially sophisticated. It would not prevent spell chants from working, which were about establishing a mindset in the caster, not making sounds that triggered magic. Any properly trained adventurer could cast their spells while underwater or otherwise muffled, even if that training hadn't been with a big family or fancy guild.

Casting a spell while being dragged by the face was another matter, however. Right after the very localised silence, tough straps had wrapped around his head, wet with what his sharp sense of smell identified immediately as blood. Carilo didn't panic, trying to push out with his aura senses, only to find something pushing back.

He hadn't even noticed the other aura until it started suppressing him, which was a terrifying level of control. The strength of it was no less concerning, given that he could tell it was silver rank, yet had strength more like gold. It swiftly and mercilessly crushed Carilo's aura, completely suppressing him.

Carilo felt himself being swiftly dragged into thick scrub, plants whipping at him as he was yanked across the rough jungle floor. Panic was now starting to kick in, but Carilo steeled his resolve and reached up to pry at the straps binding his head. He couldn't get them off his head entirely, but at least managed to peel them away from his eyes, restoring his sight. He grabbed at a tree, halting his unwilling passage across the ground. He was in the midst of heavy jungle growth, the canopy thick enough to turn daylight into near-dark.

Acting quickly, Carilo activated his shield ability. It was the common force barrier that would stop projectiles, magical or otherwise, along with powers that directly affected the target. Such direct powers were common among affliction specialists, and if it was Asano that attacked, it would likely be a strong counter to his abilities.

What it didn't stop were slow-moving physical objects, along with anything already in place, such as the straps around Carilo's head. He wrapped his legs around the tree he had grabbed, bracing himself against the straps still tugging at him. He then made a concerted effort to yank off the straps and they gave way, but they didn't pull away. The force yanking at them halted and they started thrashing like tentacles.

The straps looked like leather that had been saturated in blood, which started raining off the flailing tentacles in thick gobbets. The blood splashed on the rich soil, the lush jungle scrub and over Carilo himself. Each of the gobbets rapidly transformed into leeches with horrific lamprey teeth. They crawled over Carilo as he scrambled to his feet, hopping back away from the straps. It wasn't so easy, though, caught in the thick scrub, and many leeches were already burrowing into his arms, legs and torso. His healer's perception power catalogued the poisons each bite pumped into him, many of which he resisted, but fewer than he should. He suspected the aura keeping his own locked down also had some means of suppressing resistance.

Carilo was no stranger to casting spells under harsh circumstances, and though being devoured by flesh-eating leeches was harsher than most, he didn't let it distract him as he started to cast a spell that would send searing light bursting out of his body.

"Bright heart of embers, burst for—"

Because it was about the mindset, a sword passing through the back of his neck and out through his throat shouldn't, strictly speaking, disrupt the spell incantation. It was a fairly good way to distract the mind, however, and the spell failed. The magic gathered inside Carilo, ready to burst out, instead went wild in his chest. He wasn't some weak iron ranker, however, so the damage was relatively minor.

It took more than a severed spine and a miscast spell to slow down a silver ranker and Carilo didn't allow himself to be distracted for more than an admittedly critical moment.

He ignored the sword in his neck to move forward and launch a backwards kick, just a moment after the sword slid into him. He felt the kick connect, eliciting a surprised grunt from behind him, but whirling to confront his attacker, they were already gone. Disturbingly, the kick he landed had delivered some kind of retaliatory curse that was making the leech poison worse.

He knew his attacker had hidden rather than fled as Carilo's aura was still unnervingly suppressed. Having a moment to look around, he had time to consider the aura itself. It was overwhelmingly powerful and domineering; being suppressed by it felt like being in a dark room where he could only make out ominous shapes moving in the shadows. He reached up to push the sword out of his neck but it slid out on its own and Carilo spun to watch where it went, even as he cast a healing spell on himself. Even for a silver ranker, powering through a severed spine on raw willpower would only work for so long.

Trying to follow the sword to its owner was revealed as a trap as once more Carilo was attacked from behind, this time by two quick dagger slashes that penetrated his light armour's weaker areas. The cuts were light and in non-critical areas, but Carilo knew that poison didn't need them to be. His resistance to various afflictions was quite high, but his perception power showed him that these afflictions didn't care as a terrifying slate of them dug in with each attack.

Whirling around, all Carilo saw was a dark shape withdrawing into the shadows. He didn't try casting a cleanse, knowing that with the length of the chant, it would get it interrupted without his team to cover him. The same was meant to be true of an affliction specialist, but that didn't seem to matter to Asano. That was who Carilo assumed he was facing, after being swiftly layered with afflictions. Until that moment, he considered it might have been some other enemy, as he had still not gotten a clear look at them.

Carilo knew there was a clock on what was happening as his team would already be looking and the silence effect would not last long. Instead of casting a spell, he went for a potion from his belt, the vials having endured the drag across the jungle floor just fine. Belts that magically protected potions from incidental damage were amongst the most fundamental of adventuring gear.

As Carilo moved the vial towards his mouth, a shadow hand emerged from the shadows surrounding him and grabbed his arm. Many more arms shot out of the dark to wrap him up like a spider web, and while he was able to pull himself free, the vial was knocked from his hand.

As Carilo was pulling himself free, an alien figure appeared above him, hovering under the jungle canopy. It was a blue and orange eye-shaped nebula inside an otherwise

empty floating cloak. Around it floated orbs containing smaller versions of the same nebula, all of which fired blue beams that were blocked by Carilo's shield.

Six beams savaged the shield, which vacuumed Carilo's mana to maintain itself and he realised the beams were disruptive-force damage, the bane of magical barriers. Then he felt more of his mana sucked out, drained away into the shadows around him, which were indistinguishable from one another in the dark.

Carilo allowed his shield to drop, knowing that if he let his mana drain completely, he was done. To his surprise, the alien entity floating above him ceased attacking the moment the shield dropped. It turned into a cloud of blue and orange light that dashed away, vanishing into the jungle.

In the wake of its departure, Carilo finally got a good look at his enemy. Emerging from the shadows, the figure he assumed was Asano looked only vaguely like a person. It was wrapped in a starry portal, with eyes that looked like nebulas in a distant void, identical to those of the departed entity. Asano seemed unaffected by the thick scrub, as if space itself was warping around him to permit easy passage.

Carilo suspected the figure he presumed to be Asano cast a spell, unheard in the silence, as he felt more afflictions take hold. He turned to run, knowing his team was his only chance, but he found his enemy right in front of him. Then he felt the sword that had flown off come back, stabbing right back into the same wound it had left. Right after, the silence ended.

"Feed me your sins."

Carilo's perception power sensed all the affliction leave his body, only for others to take his place. Sensing their nature and knowing afflictions better than most, as a healer, these new ones were terrifying. Holy afflictions were notorious for many cleansing powers not removing them, and those that did were often slower or less effective. Carilo knew this well, the healer having such an ability himself.

Carilo couldn't bring himself to call out, too shaken as the panic that had been threatening to take hold of him finally dug its claws in. He also had a sword in his throat. Then, to his staggering surprise, the holy afflictions were drained into the sword. His perception ability briefly sensed some kind of power-suppression affliction before that ability was cut off, along with all his others.

Spent, he looked at the strange man in front of him as Asano's hand grabbed him by the face.

Escamilla was forgotten for the moment as Rangel and Tellez barked orders at their teams. While the healer from Tellez's team cleansed and healed Barrera, the others shifted from alert to battle-ready, prepping items, drawing weapons and initiating various defensive powers and buffs. They didn't hare off into the jungle looking for their missing team member, knowing full-well it could easily be a trap. They were cautious and methodical in their approach.

They were all Storm Kingdom adventurers and very familiar with the terrain around the Sea of Storms. That familiarity wasn't necessary to find the throwing dart that belonged to none of them, but it did help find a trail. Traces of blood and a disturbed patch of scrub showed the way, although it was a little worrying that none of them had heard Carilo get dragged away.

Unfortunately, hacking a passage through the jungle as they had before would make it harder to follow the trail. They were forced to push through the scrub at a more cautious speed instead of having Barrera carve a path. Even so, the jungle could only slow down the physical power of silver rankers by so much, and in a short time they found the signs of violence. It looked to have been fairly contained but there was no shortage of blood and there were signs of physical and magical combat amidst the thick scrub.

"How did we not hear this?" Rangel asked. "Tellez, do you think it was silencing magic?"

When no answer came, he looked around.

"Tellez?"

Chapter 603

Occasionally Carnivorous

A suppression-collared adventurer was trudging through the jungle, but paused in a clearing. He looked around, warily, seeing nothing but lush jungle and dark shadows. His expression was conflicted for a moment, then he turned to walk in a different direction.

“That’s not the way,” a cold voice said, sending a chill down his spine, despite the sweltering jungle. He looked around again, still seeing no one but himself. He turned again, resuming his original direction.

Jason opened his eyes as he stopped sharing senses with Shade, hidden in the shadow of the latest prisoner. He was deep in the jungle, but moving with caution.

“Thank you, Shade. This one took longer than the others to think about trying to go find his team.”

“I believe you have them rattled, Mr Asano. That’s the fourth person you’ve plucked from right under their nose.”

“Yeah, they’ll be watching for all my quiet tricks, now, and they’ve been way too careful about shielding their other healer. Maybe we should take a run at that other pair of teams.”

“You may want to leave them for now, Mr Asano. They were already at the periphery of potential sites for Miss Leal to conduct her ritual, and they’re only getting further away.”

“They’ve gone in the wrong direction?”

“It is dense jungle, Mr Asano.”

“And dense adventurers, from the sounds of it.”

“In which case, it may be best to let them distract themselves.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “Moving around with portals would be so much easier, but one of the prisoners might call my bluff and refuse to go through, even if I threaten to kill them. And then there’s this.”

He crouched down and looked at a thread so fine it was all but invisible to even silver-rank vision. If he hadn’t sensed the thrum of aura connecting it to a network of threads spread all through the jungle, he’d have never known it was there. The scope of it meant it had been put in place over the course of days, maybe a whole week, in preparation for the conflicts currently taking place in this section of jungle.

The web worked by weaving tiny threads over a vast area, imbuing them with a tiny amount of aura, to connect them to the user. Monsters, animals and essence users could

walk right through a thread without ever noticing, the broken thread reconnecting itself even as the user picked up details of the oblivious wanderer.

Logistically, setting up the web net was a huge pain, but there were advantages to the laborious requirements. While wide-area tracking magic was much simpler, it was also easy to foil. The web net was triggered by contact, circumventing effects that foiled regular tracking magic. It did have tracking magic woven into it as well, but this was designed to track portals rather than people. Jason might have an ability that shielded him from tracking, but his portals did not.

“This could have tripped me up if I hadn't seen it before,” Jason mused. Mr North, whose true form was a rune spider, used a similar ability with significantly more finesse. Web essence abilities were also in Dawn's repertoire, which Jason had seen her silver-rank avatar use on Earth. When it came to expertise in the execution of their powers, Jason had never seen anyone come close to Dawn. Jason's sharp aura senses allowed him to navigate without tripping the thread network net unless doing so served his purposes.

“The team led by Maldonado is better than the others in preparation and ability,” Shade observed. “I am being careful of the main group, so I am not always close enough to eavesdrop, but based on their activity, I suspect that they deliberately lured the other teams into this endeavour.”

“They still haven't taken the bait and gone after one of my prisoners roaming around?”

“No. Perhaps if you appear on their web net in the location where you are gathering them, they will believe it to be your base of operations and strike.”

“Maybe. They might think it's a trap. I'd think it's a trap. Are they still gathered at a base camp instead of moving around?”

“For the most part. The bulk of their group has vehicles ready for rapid deployment while their scouts monitor the other groups. There may be another scout moving to survey the prisoner gathering, but either they haven't gotten there yet or they are better at hiding than I am at finding.”

“They're probably waiting for a confirmation of my presence. If my moves against Rangel and Tellez's teams are going to get more overt, I'll have to take out the scout from Maldonado's team watching them first. She almost caught wind of me when I nabbed that last one.”

“Mr Asano, you are kidnapping and hauling off their team members. Does that not constitute overt to you, what does?”

“Having Gordon set off an orb explosion in the middle of them and snatching someone in the chaos.”

“I see. Perhaps you should move on the group going the wrong way after all,” Shade suggested. “Changing up your pattern will make it harder to ambush you.”

“Agreed,” Jason said. “I’ll have to deal with them all eventually, anyway.”

Jason looked up at a patch of jungle canopy.

“What do you think?” he asked.

The air shimmered to reveal a celestine floating in the air with a recording crystal drifting around over her head. Her hair and eyes were a pale sky blue, compared to the rich sapphire of the royal family. Her skin was also very pale, another contrast to the royal family’s typical caramel.

“Oh, it’s you,” Jason said.

Jana Costi was a gold-rank stealth specialist from Princess Liara’s team. He had not seen her since before the attack by the Builder’s flying city. Her brother had sacrificed himself to detonate the weapon Travis designed that brought the city down.

“I’m sorry about Ledev,” he said. “He was a dick, but so is everyone they build a statue of, and he definitely deserves a statue.”

“Thank you... I think. How did you sense me?”

“I didn’t; you hid from me perfectly. You weren’t quite as perfect at masking the recording crystal, though. Close but, that only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. Neither of which you have in this world, now that I think about it. Heide shoes and alchemy bombs? It doesn’t have the same ring.”

“You’re still the same, then.”

“Well, I’m fighting people alone in the jungle while you secretly follow me around again. We have been here before. I don’t suppose you want to do a little light scouting for me?”

“Your familiar seems to be doing just fine on that front.”

“He is pretty great.”

There was a cave in one of the tracking web's dead spots. To further shield it from prying eyes or their magical equivalent, Clive and Belinda had established several magic wards. They wouldn't last long, but they wouldn't need to. This kind of magic was a speciality of Belinda's, going back to her days of setting up operation points when she and Sophie were thieves.

Jason's team, minus Humphrey and Jason, were sitting on picnic furniture conjured up by Belinda, eating from a sandwich platter set up on a table. Along with the platter were two pitchers of iced tea and one of juice.

"Only two blends of iced tea," Neil complained. "I hate roughing it on contracts."

"After three years of spirit coins, you adapted to Jason being back on the team pretty quick," Sophie pointed out.

"I've been eating spirit coins in the field for three years," Neil said. "If you want to go back to that, leave me your sandwiches. You know, I quite like the idea of Jason being an auxiliary. More sandwiches, less trouble."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Clive said.

Humphrey wandered in with a confused-looking, suppression-collared adventurer. He was peering at the floor, surprised at the lack of a need to watch his footing. Not far into the cave, he had found where Clive and Belinda had used some simple rituals to turn rough stone into smooth floor. It made traversing the cave much less tricky, as the light stones weren't set up until far enough in that they couldn't be spotted from the outside.

"Another one?" Neil asked, then jabbed a thumb at the corner. "Over with the others."

Humphrey shoved the prisoner towards a ritual circle with three more people sitting in it. The ritual circle caused only silence and did not restrict the occupants from leaving it. What had happened when they made a break for it did that. The others waited for him to enter the silence zone before talking again.

"Should Jason be so blatant with using suppression collars?" Clive wondered as he watched the prisoners. "I know that a lot of adventurers keep them handy, but they are, strictly speaking, restricted tools."

"It's not like that's ever enforced unless the Adventure Society is looking to harass a member in poor standing," Neil pointed out.

"The purpose is political," Humphrey said, wandering over to the table and taking a sandwich. "Showing that Jason has enough support from the Adventure Society, or just enough influence, that he can flaunt the rules. Even if everyone is flaunting that rule already, he doesn't even have to pretend to hide it."

"Hey," Neil said. "Did you just take the sandwich with willowcress and boar chunks in spicy sauce?"

Humphrey looked at the sandwich in his hand.

"Yes. You've still got half a sandwich left to eat."

"I was going to eat that one next," Neil complained.

"You realise that you're going to get fat again," Belinda told him.

“I was never fat!”

Eric Maldonado was pacing back and forth in the ready site that had been set up days earlier. It was a cleared section of jungle with a ritual-magic perimeter to stop the jungle from growing back. In high-magic zones, plant growth could be sudden, unpredictable and occasionally carnivorous.

Maldonado had sunk exorbitant amounts into this operation, from burning favours to most of the money he had earned during the surge, but he was struggling to see the value. The specialist tracker who had been so expensive to hire was completely failing to track Asano, despite her assurances that her net would work around tracking-magic countermeasures.

All she had found was the people Asano had taken from their teams and sent roaming through the jungle alone. Maldonado even had a scout to check on them as they moved through the jungle and they were, in fact, alone. As for their destination, where other prisoners had already gathered, he was yet to send a scout because it reeked of a trap. If nothing else, the tracker had detected a portal some time ago, making it Asano's likely entry point to the area.

Asano himself was a stealth user, according to Maldonado's research, but the rest of his team was not. It was Maldonado's guess that the rest of the team were in that location, guarding Asano's prisoners and preparing an ambush.

It was increasingly clear that not only was Asano aware that he was being hunted, but had cancelled the familiar ritual and was hunting them, in turn. It was only the sunk cost of the operation that had stopped Maldonado from calling an end to it.

One of the reasons Maldonado was willing to continue was that the most expensive specialist on hand was a communications specialist. This was a member of the Adventure Society and getting him to participate in such a shady operation had been extremely pricy. His scout being able to feed him real-time information had made Maldonado more confident in maintaining a level of control. But the longer they operated without catching Asano's tail, the more that confidence eroded.

Asano had managed to take four people from Rangel's group. Not only did he do so under the nose of the rest of the group, but also under that of Maldonado's scout, watching them. Despite his assurances that he would not let himself be distracted again, Maldonado was not confident.

“Mr Maldonado.”

The communication specialist, Constantin, approached him.

"I believe that Asano has decided to change his pattern and strike the other group."

"That makes sense. His attacks on Rangel's group were becoming increasingly untenable. What do you mean by 'you believe?' What did Piera report?"

Piera was the scout observing the second group.

"Piera was removed from my communication group," Constantin said. "That she did so without reporting it suggests that the first target of the attack was her."

Maldonado ran a hand over his face.

"How long ago?"

"Moments."

"You're saying that a silver-ranker was taken out before she could even report being under attack?"

"Unlikely. It is more likely that the communication was interfered with."

"How?"

"There are spells and wards that can do so. Many dispel effects can cut an individual out of a communication link. Also, such abilities work like auras and magical senses, in that they are an expression of the soul. A sudden soul attack could account for it. You said it was an ability of Asano's."

"An unconfirmed ability. Low probability of being true, according to my source."

Maldonado shook his head angrily.

"If Havi Estos hadn't gone dark I wouldn't have been forced to use an untested information broker."

"Perhaps that was a sign that you should not have undertaken this at all," Constantin suggested.

"You were happy enough to take the money," Maldonado said bitterly.

"It was a lot of money," Constantin replied calmly.

Maldonado sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Alright," he announced loudly. "Everyone gather round."

The rest of his team moved closer and he explained the situation.

"I know this isn't what any of us wanted," he said. "But the reality is that Asano isn't the soft target we thought. We knew he wasn't going to be what we made him out as to that idiot Rangel, but this is more than we thought. By a lot. He knew we were coming and the information we had about how he fights was woefully inadequate. To the point that it might have even been fed to us that way."

"You think we were set up?"

“It’s clear that he knew we were coming, so it’s a possibility. It may be that his connections aren’t *all* at the expensive end of town.”

“What about Piera?” asked Reyes, one of his team members. “We’re just going to let him have her?”

“Either she’s dead or she’s not,” Maldonado said.

“She’s not,” the mercenary tracking specialist said. “I’ve just picked her up walking in the same direction as the others Asano took out.”

Maldonado nodded.

“Pull out,” he instructed. “I’ll stay alone and approach where the prisoners are gathering.”

“The damn ambush site?” Reyes asked. “Boss, you shouldn’t go up against Asano by yourself, let alone his whole team where they’re set up waiting.”

“It won’t be to fight. If Piera and the others are alive, it’s to make a point.”

“I knew we should have hired a gold ranker,” said Nuñez, another team member.

“The whole point was to show that *we* could handle Asano,” Maldonado said.

“Yeah, except you lured in a bunch of other teams and hired merc specialists.”

“Silver-rank specialists,” Maldonado said. “This whole thing is about perception, not facts, and what people care about is rank. Outside of aberrations like Asano – which is why we targeted him in the first place – people don’t play outside their rank. As long as we only use silver-rank assets, we’ll just be looked at as resourceful. Getting a gold ranker would have defeated the entire point.”

Maldonado hung his head.

“You’re all leaving,” he said. “I will go to Asano and negotiate Piera’s return.”

“Boss,” Reyes said. “That will be giving Asano all the cards.”

“He already has them,” Maldonado said wearily. “We bet heavy and we lost. It’s time to accept that with dignity and pay up. Make no mistake: we’re in the wrong. We gambled our money and our reputations, and we didn’t win. I’m not sure that we ever had a chance. The stacked deck is what drove us to this in the first place, and I’m not sure we ever really did have a chance. What comes next will be bad. How bad depends on Asano.”

“It won’t be that bad,” Jason said, stepping out of the jungle. “I respect someone who knows when to cut bait.”

Chapter 604

If You're Going to Punish Someone

Maldonado's team whirled at the unexpected voice. A man was walking out of the jungle and over the ritual line at the edge of the base camp. He was wearing dark red combat robes, not voluminous like a scholar's robe, but still draping loosely. He was not tall, but he had the lean athleticism of an adventurer. His features were sharp, with a pointed chin under a neatly trimmed beard. His dark hair was glossy, shining in the sunlight.

His presence was unsettling for two reasons. One was his eyes, with black sclera and irises that weren't irises. They were made up of blue and orange energy that was similar to an iris, but not quite the same. The result was an uncanny-valley alienness, like something inhuman wearing human skin.

Strange eyes were far from unheard of amongst adventurers, however. What genuinely unnerved them was that they couldn't sense his aura. At all. Looking at someone and sensing nothing was something that almost all adventurers had experienced at one point or another. It was what happened when someone higher rank was about to make a point. They knew Asano wasn't higher rank than them; it just felt like it.

"He's alone," said Nuñez nervously. He was one of Maldonado's team members.

"Shut up, Nuñez," Maldonado scolded. "You don't walk out in front of this many people without knowing something they don't."

A predatory smile teased at the corners of Jason's mouth. A portal arch rose up behind him and the rest of his team emerged, forming a row behind him. Maldonado walked out from his team to meet Jason and they stopped in front of one another. Maldonado was taller by half a head, with tan skin and hawkish features. A celestine, his hair and eyes were onyx black.

"You're him," Maldonado said.

"I'm him."

"It was never going to work, was it?"

"There's always someone like you. Someone who fails to make a name for themselves during the surge, then tries to make one on the back of a more successful adventurer. They watch out for that kind of thing."

Maldonado narrowed his eyes.

"But they don't stop it," he realised. "They let the successful adventurer demonstrate where their success came from."

“If it’s viable. You did a lot better than most, so I’m told. You did deliberately leak your plan to Rangel and the other group, right?”

“Yes. The idea was to soften you up. Draw you into the open and strike.”

“You made a lot of preparations. You don’t seem like someone who needs to take this approach. I’d think you would do just fine playing it straight as an adventurer. Why gamble on this?”

“Family,” Maldonado said. “A nobleman married into our family and—”

“That sounds like a long story,” Jason said, cutting him off. “I don’t care that much. At the end of the day, what matters is what you did, what I did, and where we go from here.”

“And where is that?”

Jason moved away from Maldonado, looking around their base camp as he slowly meandered. There were skimmers designed to hover over jungle canopy, crates full of resources and Maldonado’s team.

“You really went all out,” he observed. “There were people who suggested that the authorities deal with this, instead of leaving it between adventurers. That you’d pulled in too many people and used too many resources for me to handle. Can you guess why I insisted on doing this myself?”

“To prove that you can?”

“No,” Jason said, softly enough that only the sensitive ears of silver-rankers allowed the others to hear. “That’s what Adventure Society wants. What the royal family want. What all the people with a vested interest in me not haring off and doing something drastic want. But I’m past the point in my life where I care about proving things. It doesn’t change anything and it doesn’t stop people like you or the Builder or gods from interfering in my life, even though they fall short EVERY DAMN TIME!”

Jason paused. Despite not needing to breathe he drew in a slow, calming breath. He turned back to look at Maldonado, and when he spoke again, his voice was quiet once again.

“The reason I came out here myself - why I started putting people down with my own hands – is because you brought trouble to my friend to get to me. That made me angry. I wanted to punish you; no points to make or reputation to build. My first instinct was to make sure the only part of you that left this jungle was the part I washed off my hands, after.”

Jason’s face took on a sincere, friendly smile as Maldonado was finally able to perceive Jason’s aura. To Maldonado’s senses, Jason’s aura seemed as authentic and amiable as his expression. It sent chills down his back.

"I've been in this situation before," Jason said. "I spent a lot of time in an emotionally dark place because of people like you. People who thought they could get something from me and didn't care who they hurt in the process. I don't, strictly speaking, regret all the killing, but I regret that I had to do it."

Jason let out a little laugh.

"Listen to me," he said affably, as if every person on the clearing wasn't completely focused on him. "I sound like a domestic abuser. As I said: an emotionally dark place."

His smile turned sad, his aura radiating regret, but also hope.

"But I'm better now. I don't do that kind of thing anymore. It's just hard, you know? Avoiding the harmful patterns of the past. Take you, for example. You saw a pathway to something you wanted and didn't care about going through the people around me to get it. In my world that's what they call a trigger; something that might cause you to go back to old, destructive habits. Well, cause *me* to go back to old habits. To regress."

Jason walked forward into Maldonado's personal space. Close enough to smell his fear, if it hadn't been plain to see in his aura.

"You don't want me to regress do you, Mr Maldonado?"

Maldonado shook his head.

"Great," Jason said, beaming a bright smile as he backed away from Maldonado.

"You saw the attention on me and thought it was the people watching me that made me important. That if you humiliated me, they would be watching you instead, making you important. You believed that I was vulnerable. Soft."

"And he's not soft," Belinda called out. "He's harder than a fifteen-year-old boy getting a titty massage."

Every person in the clearing turned to look at her.

"What?" she asked. "I'm helping."

"Remember the discussion we had about setting a tone?" Humphrey told her.

"Belinda," Jason called out to her, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Please refrain from using the word 'titty' while I'm attempting to monologue."

"I told you that serious Jason was never going to work," Neil muttered, earning him a glare from Humphrey.

"Well, that's ruined," Jason said. "I had this whole speech about consequences and the choice between ruthlessness and mercy. Humphrey, should I just cut my losses and kill them all? It's not exactly the point I was going to make, but it'll do."

Maldonado's team had already been on a knife's edge, and Jason's offhand had them reaching for weapons.

"Everyone stand down," Maldonado called out. "He's not going to kill us."

"Try and kill us, you mean," said Reyes, a member of Maldonado's team.

"You heard him talk about the authorities," Maldonado said. "They won't let him just massacre a group of adventurers. He kept the prisoners alive, remember? Whatever is going to happen, he can't kill us."

Jason stared at Maldonado for a long time as both teams looked on, ready to spring into action.

"That's sound reasoning," Jason said finally. "What do you think, Jana?"

The gold-ranker revealed herself with a shimmer.

"The point was to prove you could deal with them without calling on a gold ranker," she told him.

"I don't need you to deal with them. I need you to tell them what happens if I kill them all."

"Well, Princess Liara is going to yell at you."

Jason gave her a flat look.

"Fine," Jana acknowledged. "She's going to yell at me. And the Adventure Society won't be happy. Or his Ancestral Majesty. Actually, I don't know about him; he lets you get away with everything. You will certainly be disinvented to the celebration ball. Well, *almost* certainly. There are things that need to be... okay, you'll probably still be invited, but you'll get some moderately disapproving looks."

"Jason," Humphrey said. "You're trying to give up killing adventurers, remember?"

"Fine," Jason unhappily conceded. "I'm not just letting this slide, though. These people have to pay."

"It was me," Maldonado said. "This was all my idea. My team, my plan. I pushed them into it. If you're going to punish someone, punish me. I'm the one behind it."

"That's noble," Jason said, looking around at Maldonado's team. "But they're all here and they knew what they were coming for. They made that choice."

"What will you do?"

Everyone waited in silence as Jason looked at Maldonado with a contemplative expression.

"The right choice," he said, "is to wash my hands of you and leave the choice to the Adventurer Society. If it were up to me, I'd have all your Adventure Society memberships revoked. It would probably happen, in different times, but while the surge is over, the need for adventures is not. But I'm tired of people's crappy actions being overlooked because they're going to be needed."

“You’re wrong,” Jana told him. “The Adventure Society needs people, but they turned on their own. The society can forgive a lot of sins, but not adventurers turning on one another. How did you think you got away with killing those adventurers in Greenstone? They’d given up adventuring and went after an adventurer in good standing. If you hadn’t dealt with them, the society would have.”

Jason turned to her.

“Really?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, gesturing at Maldonado’s team. “These people were gone the moment they even attempted this plan. I imagine the society will recruit the smart ones as functionaries, though. Very closely monitored, and with crap raining down on them from a very great height. If they can take that and keep their noses clean long enough, they’ll get a pathway back to being adventurers. Until then, they’ll be scooting around after actual adventurers, cleaning up messes like someone who just bought a puppy. The rest will have to find their own way in life. Where do you think the noble houses get their high-ranking house guards? Dregs that were kicked out of the Adventure Society, usually.”

After Jason had ratcheted up the tension, the appearance of a gold ranker had wound things down. Unlike Jason, the vast majority of adventurers were very respectful of rank and the appearance of an authority figure gave them confidence that things would be settled, if not well, then at least non-violently.

Jason’s team moved from where they were lined up in front of the portal to join him.

“It’s time to let it go, Jason,” Clive assured him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“They’ll get what’s coming to them, and they aren’t worth our time.”

“Alright,” Jason said and started moving towards the portal. “Jana is surprisingly good at monologuing.”

“Hey!” Maldonado called out. “You have one of my team members.”

Jason stopped and turned around.

“So?”

Maldonado looked to Jana.

“Don’t expect me to help you,” she told him. “You sent people after him. The condition you get them back in is none of my business.”

Jana then vanished in a shimmer.

“I’m willing to negotiate her release with no further harm,” Maldonado said to Jason, who turned and walked away.

“You don’t have anything I want.”

“You’re not going to the party,” Liara told Belinda.

“Oh, come on. You’re going to make me miss the big fancy party?”

“Jason, against all odds, was actually doing what he was told for once and playing the – admittedly melodramatic – serious adventurer.”

In the cloud pagoda, an angry Liara, with a nervous Rick Geller beside her, was in the middle of reaming out Team Biscuit for going off-message. Sitting with them was Jana, sharing wincing side-glances with Jason.

“Don’t even get me started on you,” Liara told her. “You weren’t meant to be seen at all, let alone doing a double-act with Asano.”

“It’s not like you’ve never been to a big fancy party before,” Sophie consoled Belinda.

“Yeah, but this time I was invited. I was hardly going to steal anything.”

“What?” Liara said, wheeling on her.

“I mean, I’m not going to steal anything. Please let me go to the party.”

“You should probably let her,” Clive advised. “If you don’t, she’ll just try and sneak in.”

“It’s in the royal palace,” Liara said. “I’m sure she’s a fine thief – she’s certainly an enthusiastic one - but there’s no way she won’t get caught.”

“And would her getting caught make things better or worse?” Jason asked. “Your best bet is to let her in the door.”

Liara closed her eyes and groaned.

“My preference would be that you skip this ball and leave right now,” she muttered through gritted teeth.

“Done, we’re bunking off,” Jason said, jumping to his feet. “Everyone out of the building; I need to turn this place into a magic school bus.”

“Stop!” Liara commanded. “Sit down, Mr Asano.”

“Boo,” he jeered as he dropped back into his seat.

“I’ve been telling everyone this wouldn’t work,” Neil said.

“Look,” Liara said. “There are a lot of people doing a lot of things to make this dual-identity scenario work. I’ve seen plenty of follow-up plans if it doesn’t, but they aren’t approaches that you’re going to like. They aren’t approaches that I like, if for no other reason than you’ll disagree with them. I’ve seen how that works out. Just stay in the pagoda, don’t make trouble and we’ll see to it that no one else makes trouble for you.”

“Autumn got her frog familiar?”

Liara’s expression turned evasive.

“What happened?” Jason asked, narrowing his eyes.

“She has her new familiar,” Liara assured him. “She’s still out there, in her familiar’s own environment as she gets to know it. She’s strengthening their bond before she brings it back to civilisation.”

“Is there a problem?” Humphrey asked.

“Well, I imagine you’re aware that if someone gets an essence ability for a frog familiar, such as Miss Leal with her frog essence, that ability covers a wide range of creatures. Any kind of magical frog or frog-like magical beast.”

“I’m getting the impression Autumn’s new familiar is more on the frog-like than the actual-frog end of the scale,” Clive said.

“Her original familiar was from the region where you were all just operating,” Liara said. “There were also frog-type magical beasts where we took her, but it was a different region, with different creatures. She ended up with a familiar not quite like her original one.”

“How not quite like her original one?” Jason asked.

“It’s a long-tongue jumping hydra,” Rick said. “It’s roughly the size of a two-story house.”

“Cottage,” Liara corrected. “It’s the size of a two-storey cottage.”

Chapter 605

One More Loyalty to Balance

Jason and Liara were in the pagoda, taking tea in a parlour as they discussed the Adventure Society liaison to his team.

“Vidal Ladiv,” Jason said. “It’s kind of an inspired choice. Someone I like and respect – when I don’t, that becomes clear very quickly. But he’s not someone I’m close to, who will be biased in my direction. It’s a smart choice.”

Vidal Ladiv was an Adventure Society official who had done very well out of the monster surge, reaching silver rank and receiving multiple promotions. Jason had only encountered Vidal a couple of times, but had been impressed with his sharp observation skills and the careful manner Jason himself could never manage to cultivate.

“He’s acceptable, then?” Liara asked.

“I’ll want to meet him again, and discuss it with the team. But provisionally, yes.”

“Good,” Liara said, then placed her empty teacup down and stood up. “Then I’m going to go before something ridiculous happens.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have said that.”

“It wasn’t a challenge, Asano.”

“I’m just saying that tempting fate like that is buying trouble you could have avoided for free. Use the pole if you’re looking to get out faster.”

“The elevating platform is fine, thank you.”

She descended to the atrium and started walking across it towards the open doors. She heard loud sounds of splashing from the river outside, along with laughter and yelling. Leaving the pagoda, she spotted two giant hydras splashing around in the water, to the delight of onlooking children.

One of the creatures was the long-tongue jumping hydra that Autumn Leal had bonded with, while the second was almost identical. They were enormous and they sent water everywhere, only half-submerged even in the deepest part of the river. Rather than scales like a normal hydra, they had skin like frogs, patterned in shades of green, blue, teal and yellow. Liara looked at the difference in the second hydra, slowly blinked, then looked again, confirming that she wasn’t imagining it. The second hydra had what was definitely – and extremely incongruously – moustaches on each of its five heads.

Two adults were standing on the riverbank, one of whom was yelling.

“No! You do not get more biscuits because you have more heads. And you don’t get bigger biscuits because you’re bigger. We’ve had this discussion, before, so if you want the biscuit to seem bigger, turn into something smaller.”

“It can’t hurt to indulge him just this once,” Autumn told Humphrey.

“Oh, it’s not just this once,” Humphrey said. “It’s never once with him. He’s a biscuit bandit.”

“Well, you do what you like,” Autumn said. “I’m giving Brian one biscuit per head.”

“Excuse me, Princess,” a voice came from behind Liara and she turned around to see Rick Geller approaching where she was standing in the doorway. He was pushing a wheelbarrow full of biscuits the size of dinner plates through the atrium.

“Rick, where are the parents of these children?”

“Oh, they're used to it. Humphrey's familiar is always shape-shifting into giant monsters, apparently. Turns out kids love monsters that aren't attempting to eat them. If you don't mind, milady, can I scoot past?”

She moved out of his way and he wheeled his burden outside.

“Rick,” Humphrey scolded on seeing the wheelbarrow. “What did I say?”

“That you wanted a wheelbarrow full of giant biscuits? That’s what Jason told me you...”

Rick hung his head in shame.

“I see where I went wrong, now,” he said.

“It’s not like he’s going to get fat,” Autumn said.

“I’m not going to let him get greedy. It’s a problem with dragons and I promised his mum.”

Liara shook her head looking around for her flying carriage, which she had left on the lawn.

“Where’s my vehicle?”

“I have no idea,” the moustachioed hydra said. “It’s definitely not at the bottom of the river.”

As her rental carriage had become a hydra toy, Liara had to go to the compound of the royal family branch living on Arnote and borrow one. She then returned to the sky island that contained the royal palace, along with residences for the majority of the royal family and some of the most prominent diplomats.

Entry to the sky island was via the column of water that reached up from the sea like the trunk of a tree. Her flying carriage, coming from the royal family, was designed to

produce a bubble shield that was carried up by the column until it passed through the bottom of the island and surfaced on a small lake. The lake was in the middle of the sky island, with the royal palace constructed around it.

Leaving the carriage where the palace stewards would deal with it, she passed through the mandatory security checks that even the Storm King had to undergo on returning to the palace before she was allowed to move through the most public and least secure section of the palace.

After leaving the sprawling palace and entering the residential outskirts, she was finally allowed to move unescorted. With the festival ongoing, security at the palace had been stepped up. The end of the surge was an unofficial end to the moratorium on political intrigue and with so many changes, some might be tempted to do something bold and stupid. Jason Asano wasn't the only one subject to such attention, and when the noble families went at one another, the stakes were always high.

She moved quickly through the wide, tree-lined boulevards, not caring about decorum as she used her gold-rank speed to flicker through the streets. She could have hidden with her prodigious stealth abilities, but on the royal sky island that would trip alarms, rather than avoid attention.

Liara slowed down on reaching a park that many townhouses backed onto, including her own. She followed a path right up to her back door, from which delicious smells wafted the moment she opened it. She went inside and tension left her shoulders as she relaxed in the way that only arriving home made possible. It was nice having a full house again, with her husband home and her daughters still staying with them. Only her son was not living back home, having his own house on the most populous of the three Rimaros islands, Provo.

Liara was royal family, as were her children, but theirs was a minor branch of the Royal House of Rimaros. Compared to Vesper or Zara, who came from the main branch, Liara was barely royalty at all. Although technically a princess, she shouldn't even be referred to as her royal highness, although outside of formal events, she would never be dinged for failing to correct that common mistake of protocol.

Liara's closeness to the dealings of the royal family proper came from one minor factor and one major one. The minor one was that her hair and eyes were the full, vibrant sapphire that was the signature of the royal family. Many branch family members lacked it, so it made others instinctively connect her with the main family line.

The major factor contributing to Liara's importance in matters of state was her accomplishments. She had a long and successful career, both as an adventurer and an

Adventure Society official. She was known as a woman who got things done, and her accomplishments and importance within the Adventure Society made her a useful asset to the royal family. Her ability to straddle the line of her various obligations without violating any lines of loyalty was also highly valued. When holding seats in multiple camps, integrity went from desirable to necessary.

Inside the back door was a mudroom, where Liara slipped off her shoes and placed them on a rack. There was a laundry basket where she dropped her outer garments as she stripped down to slim pants and a simple shirt before going into the house proper. It was her husband and eldest daughter cooking, rather than using the servant automaton. Baseph insisted the food was better when cooked themselves, and while Liara could never tell the difference, she never pointed that out.

Liara and Baseph had an arranged marriage in their youth, which was normal in their society and neither resented it. They had liked each other well enough and loved their children, and their relationship had grown into a comfortable friends-with-benefits arrangement.

Then came the death of Vesper Rimaros, who was only a distant relative but a close friend, and her team member, Ledev Costi. They had died together at the heart of the Builder's floating city, their bodies never recovered before they turned to rainbow smoke and vanished. The Church of Death had been needed to confirm that neither had made a miraculous last-minute escape.

After that came Baseph's ordeal with the underwater complex he was managing being raided by the Order of Redeeming Light. With gold-rank threats literally hammering at the door, only another of Jason Asano's impossible absurdities had seen him escape safely. Asano had paid the price of that, not just by nearly dying but in drawing attention to his many secrets, now being eyed-off by the powerful and ambitious. Liara would always be grateful for that sacrifice, giving her one more loyalty to balance.

The result of these trials was that, in their wake, Liara and Baseph's marriage had become much more of a loving one after decades of casual relations. The losses and dangers that they faced made them confront how much they had come to mean to one another over the years.

Liara came into the kitchen, snaked a slice of vegetable and popped it into her mouth before kissing her husband on the cheek. He held his hands, wet and sticky from mixing ingredients, away from her.

"Have those hands been washed?" he asked her. "In the blood of the wicked does not count, by the way."

“Your father thinks he’s funny,” Liara told Dara, her eldest.

“You think I’m joking,” Baseph said as he went back to mixing stuffing in a bowl.

“Hands off my chopping board until those hands have been cleaned, wife.”

“Will Joseph and Zareen be joining us for dinner?” Liara asked as she sat at the kitchen table. Baseph and Dara shared a look, leading Liara to narrow her eyes at them, resisting the urge to peek at their emotions through their auras.

“Joe is on his way,” Dara said as she chopped vegetables. “Zareen wasn’t sure if she’d be back in time or not.”

“Back from where?” Liara asked. Zareen had been close to Vesper, picking up her relative's taste for the politics that Liara disdained but could never seem to escape.

“She went to see someone,” Baseph said. “I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

“Someone,” Liara said, latching onto the word. As an investigator with decades of experience, she could recognise when a word was hiding multitudes of sin. “Please tell me that this has nothing to do with Jason Asano and the kind of kingdom-sized mess that follows him around like a hydra with five moustaches.”

“I wouldn’t say—” Baseph said before stopping short. “Wait, what did you just say?”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Liara promised. “Where is Zareen?”

“Hydra with moustaches?” Dara mused. “Maybe I should be spending more time with Asano.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Liara said. “I do *not* want you getting involved with Asano and his nonsense. You remember meeting Rick Geller?”

“The one from up north,” Dara said. “Has those elf twins on his team that keep teasing him?”

“I don’t know about that second part, but yes,” Liara said. “I saw him today with a wheelbarrow full of giant biscuits.”

“What do you mean?” Baseph asked.

“I mean I watched him pushing a wheelbarrow full of enormous baked goods,” Liara said, holding her hands up to indicate the size.

“Why?” Dara asked. “Something to do with that hydra?”

“It wasn’t actually a hydra; it was a dragon,” Liara said. “But I’ll tell you about that later, too. Where is Zareen?”

“Just so you know, Lee,” Baseph said, “you’re doing a really bad job of not of making a visit to Asano’s pagoda sound anything but fascinating.”

“Baseph. Where. Is. Our. Daughter?”

“She went to see someone, I told you that. Just to talk.”

“And we’re back to this. Who is the someone?”

“Look,” Baseph said. “Zareen came to me with something she wanted to talk about, and she knew you wouldn’t like it.”

“What did she want to talk about?”

“An idea she had.”

“That I wouldn’t like.”

“I think that’s safe to say, yes.”

“Was it something political?”

“I’d say so.”

“And you told her to give up on the idea, firmly and thoroughly dissuading her?”

“Of course,” Baseph said unconvincingly. Liara looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“I may have phrased it badly,” he admitted.

“How badly?”

“He told her that if she wanted to pursue it,” Dara chimed in, “she should go see Trenchant Moore.”

Liara gave her husband a flat glare.

“Trenchant Moore is not a political man,” she said.

“See?” Baseph said. “It’s not so bad.”

“With the single exception,” Liara continued, “of being the contact point for his Ancestral Majesty.”

“Oh, is he?” Baseph asked in a voice that might have sounded innocent if not for being an octave higher than normal.

“I think you had better tell me all about this idea of our daughter’s, husband,” Liara said.

“Ooh, you’re in trouble now,” Dara said. “That’s her ‘I caught you selling death essences on the black market’ voice.”