

Chapter 182: Particular Appetites

In the old stone fortress in Old City, now a neutral ground of criminal delights, one of Cole Silva's thugs knocked on the door of Silva's office.

"Enter," came a gruff bark from inside. The thug went in, his body screaming reluctance.

"Boss?"

"What?"

"You asked for any news about Wexler."

"And?"

"She was part of the team that brought back the thing that big-time out-of-towner was after. I don't think we'll ever have a shot at her, boss."

A short time later, two more thugs dragged the body out of the office as Silva strode back and forth, fuming.

"You want us to send someone to clean up the blood, boss?"

"No," Silva snarled, then stopped his pacing. "Find Killian Laurent and have him come see me."

Emir had not entirely thrown out the usual decorum of a high society soiree, with one of his staff announcing each of the prestigious guests as they arrived. The guests were then met by Constance, at her most proper, and Jason, considerably less so.

"It didn't occur to you to wear long pants?" Constance asked him quietly between arrivals.

"Nah," Jason said.

Zara Rimaros was the next to arrive, flanked by her two offsidiers and accompanied by an older woman. Zara's companion was another celestine with the same caramel skin set off by sapphire eyes and hair. She looked around thirty but Jason had come to recognise the agelessness of essence users, even if her politely retracted but unmistakably silver-rank aura hadn't given it away. There was something behind the eyes of high-rankers; something about the way they carried themselves. An absolute confidence that low-rankers, even amongst the nobility, were yet to develop. This woman was practically bursting with it.

"Jason," Zara greeted with a smile full of dangerous promise. "Might I introduce my aunt, Vesper Rimaros."

“A genuine pleasure,” Jason greeted, his respectful tone wholly incongruous with his short pants, floral print shirt and open-toe sandals.

“I’ve heard much about you,” Vesper greeted, apparently unfazed by Jason’s outfit.

“Oh,” Jason winced. “Don’t worry, we got all the heidels back, and most of them weren’t too traumatised. We’re completely out of fruit chutney after all that, though, so let me save you the trouble of checking the condiments table.”

“What are you talking about?” Vesper asked, whose eyebrows had slowly climbed up above her otherwise schooled expression. Jason’s expression was suddenly that of a man realising he’d said too much.

“Uh... nothing,” he said, looking about nervously. “You should say hello to Emir. He’s around here, somewhere.”

Zara, hid a giggle behind her hand, flashing her eyes at Jason.

“Emir Bahadir is currently a person of interest to our royal family over a theft that took place several years ago,” Zara told him, her words formal but her voice unable to excise the undertone of mirth.

“And he still invited you?” Jason asked. “What a magnanimous bloke.”

“You know, Jason,” Zara said. “At the risk of self-aggrandisement, I like to think that when someone meets me, I’m the most interesting person they meet that day. I’m not used to being upstaged by gods.”

“Never fear,” Jason said. “You were absolutely the most interesting person I met that day. I’m pretty sure gods are just big lumps of magic that have been around so long they gained sentience and started having funny ideas.”

“That comes dangerously close to blasphemy,” Zara’s aunt said.

“Blasphemy is kind of my thing,” Jason said.

“And yet, you were just personally and publicly praised by multiple gods,” Zara said.

“I know, right?” Jason asked. “It’s a funny old world.”

Danielle Geller came upon Rick Geller, standing alone. He was only a distant relative, to the point she wasn’t sure what their actual relation was. Some kind of much-removed nephew, from what she recalled. She had come to admire and respect the young man who had been as close to the family’s recent tragedies as anyone, losing two members of his team who were closely related. Rather than swear vengeance, he had grown into his responsibilities as a leader. Instead of dwelling on those who had fallen, he focused on protecting those that remained.

She noticed his gaze locked on something across the room. She followed it to where Jason was speaking quietly with the Rimaros princess and her royal aunt. Danielle noted the body language of the princess and the confused expression on Vesper Rimaros' face she had come to associate with people talking to Jason.

"That's the hurricane princess," Rick said.

Danielle sighed.

"I don't understand people who insist on these overblown sobriquets," Danielle said. "She's iron-rank, for goodness sake. None of you have had a chance to truly prove yourselves."

They watched Zara giggle at something Jason said, putting a hand over her mouth.

"How does he do that?" Rick asked and Danielle looked at him.

"No offence, dear boy, but a woman like that would chew you up and spit you out. I thought you were interested in one of the young ladies on your team?"

"Yes," Rick said. Normally he wouldn't admit it, but no one who had been through Geller training would consider lying to Danielle.

"I could use some of Jason's way with women," Rick said wistfully. "Really, how does he do that?"

"Did you ask him?"

"He said that what he had can't be taught."

Danielle chuckled.

"Probably true," she said. "Would you like me to tell you why?"

"Yes," Rick said enthusiastically, turning to look at Danielle.

"When it comes to princesses or other highborn women, do you know how often they meet someone who doesn't care they're a princess? Never, probably, at least in their own age group. The smarter boys learn the value of pretending they don't care, which makes the smarter young women very good at spotting it. All the more, for the social training they undergo. Then along comes Jason, who genuinely doesn't care who their family is. Add a little wit, a disregard for propriety and a penchant for the taboo and you're waving fresh meat in front of a hungry animal."

"I don't think I can be as brazen as Jason," Rick said.

"Nor should you be," Danielle said. "Jason is who he is, without apology or shame. He accepts the consequences, knowing that as many or more will hate him for it as be drawn to him. People respect authenticity, however, even when it's as unusual as Jason's. There's an integrity to it. That's what you are looking for. You don't need to be like Jason. You need to figure out who you are, Rickard. Be true to that and accept the

consequences. Then you won't have to go looking for the right people because you'll have already learned to recognise them."

"You really think it's that simple?" Rick asked.

"I do," Danielle said. "Simple, however, is not the same thing as easy."

Jason was still greeting new arrivals, the steady presence of Constance a guiding light. She would subtly indicate a guest who would not respond well to Jason's particular social graces and he affected enough civility that no one made a fuss, in spite of his, to their eyes, ludicrous appearance.

Various groups had arrived from various religious organisations, many of whom were at a loss as to how to handle Jason. One such group was from the church of knowledge.

"Gabrielle," Jason greeted. "I didn't realise you were participating in the trials."

"My lady felt that I would benefit from facing challenges where I did not have her to rely upon."

"Yeah, the Healer mentioned that the gods couldn't access astral spaces. It's always fun to hear that even gods have their limits."

Behind him, Constance pointedly cleared her throat.

"My lady has prepared another gift for you," Gabrielle said, clearly unhappy to be delivering the message. "She believes you will find it more palatable than the last. It shall be delivered on your return to Greenstone."

"I'm a little wary, after the last one," Jason said.

"She is certain that this one will be more welcome."

"I guess we'll see," Jason said.

Hester was one of Emir's most important staff members. She was in charge of logistics and coordination between all of Emir's disparate operations, for which her portal ability was a crucial tool.

Hester was from Pranay, this world's equivalent of Sri Lanka. In this world, however, it was a much larger, located further to the south and west. In a world where the Arabian Peninsula did not exist and the Mediterranean connected directly to the Indian Ocean, it's northern coast was home to several important connections for sea trade.

Hester had been born in one of those ports, the city of Jayapura. She opened a portal through which Jason and his team stepped into. They emerged from the portal with mixed reactions to the transition. Jason and Sophie, with their astral affinities were unaffected.

They immediately started taking in their surroundings, including their team members who handled the transition less well.

Humphrey had a teleport power of his own, so while not immune to the disorientation, was at least used to it. Portalling across a continent was more straining than across a room, but he took a deep breath and was fine. Clive and Neil were less experienced but it was not their first time, staggering a little before righting themselves. Belinda had the worst of it, lurching dizzily until Sophie stepped in to prevent her from falling over entirely. Stash the puppy stumbled about before toppling over and letting out an unhappy whine.

They were in a courtyard full of lush plants, in raised planters and hanging from walls. The walls, planters and even the floor were covered in mosaic tiles in bright, cool colours. The shades of blue, green and turquoise gave the courtyard an underwater feeling, the vibrant space lit up by the bright sunlight. The air was hot, like that in Greenstone but drier, without the mugginess produced from the delta. The heat was cut by a fresh breeze with a tang of the sea, blowing in through archways leading out of the courtyard.

Hester gave them a tour of what turned out to be a magnificent house on a clifftop, overlooking the ocean. Tunnels dug down into the rock, with stone stairwells leading down into a network of cave grottos. Platforms of metal and wood wound through the caves, suspended over the water below. Magic glow stones lit up the caves, both under the water and above.

“There are guest rooms down here or up above,” Hester told them. “You can choose whichever you prefer.”

“Down here,” Jason said immediately, grinning like a loon as he looked over a railing and into the water.

“If you want to swim, feel free,” Hester said, continuing to lead them through the colourfully-lit caves. “The main entertaining grotto actually has a bar you can only get to by swimming. Or flying, water-walking, teleporting. Whatever powers you might have.”

“You have a magnificent home,” Jason said as Hester led them back upstairs.

“You can travel a lot as an adventurer,” Hester told him, “especially with a power like mine. I think it’s important to have somewhere to come home to, though. And, of course, being adventurers gives us the means to have that.”

Hester introduced them to her extended family, all of whom lived in the expansive compound sprawling over the top of the cliff. Like many successful adventurers, she had provided her family with essences and monster cores to extend their longevity, even if they never fought a monster themselves. Hester’s family were extremely welcoming, especially Hester’s mother, Anise.

“She never brings home friends,” Anise was saying to Jason as they walked, joining them for the rest of the tour.

“Mother...”

“Oh, hush dear. You really must tell me what Hester has been up to, Jason. She’s always so secretive.”

“Let me think,” Jason said. “Ah, I know. A little while ago, there was a big expedition that went out from the city where we’ve been staying. It was a huge deal, and they sent along everyone who could open a portal or do a mass teleport. Of course, then they ended up in an astral space they couldn’t portal out of. Are you familiar with astral spaces, Anise?”

“Oh, yes,” Anise said. “So many rumours going around these days about them.”

“Well, it turned out that expedition was in desperate need of help, and it was Hester who made that happen. Without her, no one would have gotten there in time.”

“Why aren’t you the one to tell me about these things?” Anise asked Hester.

“I didn’t really do anything,” Hester said.

“Nonsense,” Jason said. “She’s an absolute hero. Humphrey and Neil, here, were on that expedition. They might not be here if it weren’t for your daughter.”

“He’s blowing things out of proportion,” Hester said.

They came to a pathway outside the house from which they could see the city sprawling down from the hilltop upon which the Hesters’ home was located. It was much larger than Greenstone, spreading out over the coastline, alongside the cerulean ocean sparkling in the sunlight.

“This is beautiful,” Jason said as they stopped to look out. “Thank you for sharing your home with us, Hester.”

“I’m just happy you managed to bring that scythe back,” Hester said. “Emir seems like a relaxed boss, but he wasn’t great to be around while you were in the astral space. The prospect of no one bringing it back after two years of effort? The whole staff is just about ready to kiss you. Don’t let them, though. Especially Weird Pants Keith.”

Killian Laurent was an elf who looked like the villain from a fairy story, with ugly, sunken features, emaciated limbs and sickly pallid skin. Dressed in ill-fitted black, even the way he walked had an unpleasant, obsequiousness to it. He sidled into Silva’s office, not even glancing at the blood soaking into the rug. Silva stood with his back to the door, not turning around at Killian’s entrance.

“You once made a suggestion to me,” Silva said without preamble. “I declined.”

“You did not want to take the risk of discovery,” Killian said in his raspy voice.

“Since then, I have been discretely approached,” Silva said. “Someone offered assistance that may make something like what you suggested more viable.”

“You are ready to take the girl?”

“No,” Silva said. “I was offered assistance in taking the man who took her from me. She’ll get hers when the man who holds her indenture contract is flushed out to sea in a thousand pieces. Is this something you can make happen?”

“Mr Silva, I am a man of particular appetites,” Killian said. “I moved my loyalties from your father to you, because you have my appetites met reliably and discreetly, where your father would not. People of my inclination operate in very small circles, and I am familiar with a man, a silver-rank adventurer, with predilections not unlike my own. There is no way such a man, being silver-rank, would enter your employ. But if he were offered the same arrangement I enjoy, I imagine he would be willing to undertake the occasional favour. For example, the quiet acquisition of a troublesome young adventurer.”

“How reliable is this man?”

“I can assure you, Mr Silva, that he is a man of exquisite caution.”

Silva did not respond for a long time, still staring at the wall without turning to face Killian.

“Very well,” Silva said. “Set up a meeting; I want to talk to this man. Also, find out exactly what he will want before the meeting happens.”