

Chapter 136: Any Team Except Yours

Jason walked up from the loop line into one the most verdant neighbourhoods on the Island, with streets and residences both full of vibrant greenery with long leaves and colourful flowers. The water-affinity of the green stone that was the foundation of the Island helped the flowers deny the encroaching autumn. The houses didn't have yards so much as grounds, with low walls that were more about decoration than security. There weren't street numbers, but family names appeared on plaques near the entry gates.

Jason found the one he was looking for and approached the gate. On the other side was a gateman reading a book in a small gazebo for shade. He clearly was more greeter than security as he looking older than the house he was guarding, although his normal aura said he was no such thing. He put his book down to approach Jason from the inside of the gate.

"May I enquire as to who is visiting?"

"Jason Asano. I'm looking for Neil Davone."

The old elf nodded and opened the gate, directing Jason to go up the path to the house and knock.

Doing just that, Jason saw some people taking drinks on a terrace and gardeners maintaining the grounds, all of whom were elves. The relaxing people glanced at him with curiosity made no move to approach as he did as instructed, going to the front door and knocking. Another elf opened the door, an older man who was the very image of understated elegance. Jason was again asked his business and he introduced himself a second time.

"Ah, Mr Asano. I was sorry to hear about your demotion and have no doubt you shall soon be rising through the ranks once more."

"You know about my demotion? And that I exist?"

"It is incumbent on the staff to keep abreast of issues that may impact the household."

"I'm guessing that's only true with a certain calibre of staff," Jason said. "I doubt everyone shares your professionalism."

"Thank you for saying, sir. Would you care to wait in the parlour while I check on the young master's availability?"

“That would be lovely,” Jason said. The elf butler led Jason into a garden parlour, just off a large courtyard filled with greenery. The elf had barely gone before a maid came in with a tea tray with finger cakes.

“Thank you,” Jason said as she poured the tea.

“This blend is from the family’s holdings in the Mistrun valley,” The maid told him as he took a sip. “They produce some of the finest tea fields in the world.”

Jason took another sip and nodded.

“I believe it,” he said, giving her a smile. “I can’t think of a finer cup I’ve had.”

“Thank you, sir,” the maid said before withdrawing. Jason enjoyed the breeze drifting in from the courtyard, carrying with it a pleasant scent of flowers. Once he finished the first cup he poured himself another and helped himself to one of the cakes as he waited. When Neil Davone finally entered, Jason got up to greet him.

They sat down, Neil pouring tea for himself into the other cup.

“So what brings you to my home, Asano?” Neil asked. Jason read his tone as civil, with an undercurrent of either challenge or resentment.

“The same reason I imagine all manner of young adventurers have come by,” Jason said.

“You want a healer. You’re putting together a team.”

“Yes. Before we get into that, can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead,” Neil said.

“Everyone I’ve seen here is an elf.”

“That’s not a question,” Neil said. “We’re an elven household; what’s odd about that?”

“Are you adopted?” Jason asked.

“No,” Neil said.

“Your parents are elves?”

“Of course they are,” Neil said. “What are you getting at?”

“Is your milkman a human?”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Neil asked.

“I’m just wondering why you aren’t an elf,” Jason said.

“I am an elf.”

“You’re an elf?”

Annoyed, Neil brushed back his hair to reveal a tapered ear.

“Wow,” Jason said, not hiding his surprise.

“Why would you think I’m a human?” Neil asked.

“Well, it’s just... look. Elves are a slender bunch. Except for Lucian Lamprey, who is probably on some kind of magicalroids, but that’s beside the point. For a human, your proportions are completely healthy. For an elf, though, you’re bit of a chunker.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know; an extra bit of heft. Too much time at the sandwich shop. An overenthusiastic between-meal snacker.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?”

“I’m not saying you’re fat,” Jason assured him. “I don’t think that’s even possible for essence users. I’m just saying you look fat. For an elf.”

“This is how you try and recruit someone?” Neil asked incredulously.

“It does seem like I’m negging you, doesn’t it?” Jason asked with an apologetic grimace. “Sorry. I really don’t want to be that guy.”

“Negging?”

“What it really comes down to is that I’m less of a best foot forward guy than an honest foot forward guy,” Jason said. “What you see is what you get, and if you join up with us, there’ll be a lot of this, if I’m being honest. Which I am. You’ve seen me at my most petty when I was dealing with Thadwick. I could say that’s not a representative sample but that would be a lie. You should have seen my two-star promotion hearing. The transcript of that one must read very strangely.”

“Maybe that’s why you got demoted,” Neil said pointedly.

“Wouldn’t shock me,” Jason said cheerfully. “So, on to the issue of forming a team. The first question is whether you’ve already joined a team. I’m sure you’ve had offers.”

“I have had offers,” Neil said. “The family is weighing them over.”

“I’m guessing they want to put you on a good team. You did them a solid by putting up with Thadwick all that time.”

“That is a concern for my family and not for you,” Neil said. “Why should I give so much as a moment’s consideration to joining your team?”

“I don’t have any kind of elaborate pitch,” Jason said. “All I have for you are two things; the reasons we want you to join us and the reasons you’ll want you to join us.”

“You think I actually want to join you?”

“Of course not,” Jason said. “You haven’t thought about it, yet. Let’s start with why we want you to join us.”

“Why would I care about your reasons?”

“Because if you join us, we’ll be your team, and what we think about each other will matter. Consider how Thadwick’s attitude affected your old team.”

"You don't know anything about our team."

"I'm not saying I do," Jason said. "I'm just saying think about it. How did Thadwick treat you? How did that affect the team? Same for your other team member, Dustin."

Neil frowned but didn't argue the point.

"We know you're a good healer," Jason said. "Rufus Remore said you're the real thing and that really means something."

"Rufus Remore said I was good?"

"More than once," Jason said. "I may talk a lot of crap but he doesn't. If he says you're the goods, then you are. That's not why we want you though. It certainly doesn't hurt but that's not what we're looking for. You went against your own church out of principle. You stood up for people because it was right, even when it cost you. That's what we're looking for."

Jason gave Neil a wry smile.

"I know I'm an arrogant fool," Jason said. "You work with what you have. It may seem like I have no guiding principles, but I do. You stood up for what you thought was right, which just so happened to help my friend Jory and who knows how many others. Whatever else happens, whether you join our team or tell us to take a hike, I want you to know that I respect you for that. I doubt you much care what I respect or don't, but there it is."

"You keep saying us," Neil said. "Who is on this team of yours, exactly? I'm assuming Humphrey Geller. Is Jory Tillman on it, too?"

"Not Jory," Jason said. "He's all about that medical research and isn't looking for a life of adventure. It's me and Humphrey, like you said. There's also a Magic Society guy, if Emir Bahadir doesn't poach him, and my indentured servant."

"Bahadir wants to steal your team member?"

"He wants to employ him for non-adventure related purposes. He's a dab hand with the practical application of magical theory. Solid ritual magic, a bit of artifice. He just did an upgrade of the Gellers' mirage chamber."

"And did you say your indentured servant?"

"Yep," Jason said. "She's doesn't have her Adventure Society membership yet, but we're training her up."

"This isn't exactly convincing," Neil said. "A magical researcher and a halfway slave who isn't even in the Society?"

"Like I said; we're training her up. She should be practising with Phoebe Geller in a training room in the cloud palace, right now. That kind of company, in that kind of location, should tell you something all by itself."

Neil shook his head.

"She was the thief everyone was chasing, right?"

"That's her," Jason said.

"And now she's training in the cloud palace to be an adventurer. How does something like that even happen?"

"The short answer? Me. Really, though, it's the same way anything happens. You look at what you want to happen, then figure out what it'll take to get there from where you are. You can do almost anything if you're willing to do what it takes. People mostly fail at things because they balk at what they have to do. It's not that the path isn't there but that they aren't willing to walk it. There's a price they aren't willing to pay, be it literal, political, social, whatever. But if you're willing to commit, impossible is just a word for people convincing themselves not to try."

Jason gave Neil an easy smile.

"You're not one of those people," Jason said. "You proved that when you stood in front of your whole church and told them no."

"I did think that stopping them was impossible," Neil said.

"Yet you stood up to them and stopped them. Most people would have stood aside without ever finding out and that's the difference. You tried. That's something I want on my team."

"What about why I would want to join?" Neil asked. "You aren't exactly enticing me with tales of a double-demoted guy and his indentured servant forming a team."

"In fairness, she may be temporary. Her indenture is six months and she may quit after, I don't know."

"It sounds like you're trying to convince me to join any team except yours."

"You want a reason to join our team? Humphrey Geller is the reason."

"I've been on a team with a big name," Neil said. "That has the exact opposite of appeal."

"It's not the name," Jason said. "It's the man. Did you hear we once ran into a marsh hydra?"

"I heard. Thadwick though it was a lie."

"Of course he did," Jason said. "It came on us unexpectedly, through a submerged tunnel while we were deep underground. Humphrey was by the exit and could have gotten

clear. It was too small a hole for the monster to chase him but Humphrey didn't even look at the way out. He came and he stood by us because we weren't close enough to reach that way out. And he's the one who fought it, too. The rest of us just hung around at the back and tried not to die."

Jason drained his teacup and got to his feet.

"Everyone knows what Thadwick did to you during the expedition," he said.

"Humphrey Geller will never do that. He'll walk into a field of death for no more reason than you're there already. I have to imagine that appeals to a man who literally stood in the path of his own church."

Jason snagged the last finger cake from the tray.

"We aren't the most impressive team," Jason said. "What you need to remember though, is that you and I are adventurers. Ask yourself, what's more valuable than people who will stand shoulder to shoulder with you when things are at their worst?"

Jason bit the small piece of cake in half, muttering appreciatively.

"Thanks for your time, Neil. And the tea. If you'd told your butler to kick me out, it would have been understandable."

Neil got up and showed Jason to the door. As he watched Jason walk toward the gate, he called out to him.

"Yeah?" Jason asked, turning back.

"You have a shadow teleport, right?"

"That's right."

"And that hydra caught you deep underground, right?"

"Yeah."

"Couldn't you have gotten to that exit, too?"

Jason scratched his head, absently thinking out it.

"It never occurred to me," Jason said. "It was really scary."