

Chapter 632

People That You Didn't Aggravate

A sprawling, multi-level, subterranean complex extended beneath the entirety of the Adventure Society campus. Large portions of which were restricted, with potent protections, including the ones through which Liara led Jason, Farrah and Travis.

"There are two things on your agenda before you go," Liara told Jason. "One is collecting your winnings from the duels, along with the additional materials from Mr Noble's list."

Liara continued to keep one of Shade's bodies hidden within her shadow, which allowed her to communicate with Jason. He had used this link to send her a list of materials he wanted procured, mostly related to Travis' weapon designs for the cloud flask.

"I appreciate you putting in the effort to collect these things since I can't go out on a shopping trip," Jason told her.

"What makes you think I did this personally?" she asked, then looked suspiciously at her shadow.

"Shade doesn't tell me what my allies are up to while he's in their shadows," Jason told her. "Not on my boat, not in my house and not out and about."

"It was one of the earliest rules Mr Asano established," Shade said. "He said he wanted to be more ethical."

"I'm pretty sure I said more than that," Jason told him.

"That was the part I felt worthy of admiration," Shade clarified.

"What was the rest of it?" Jason wondered aloud. "Shade, do you remember?"

"My memory is sometimes disadvantageously thorough in cataloguing my experiences."

"What was the rest of what I said?"

"I believe that the selectiveness with what I chose to include and omit will present you in a better light than the unabridged version, Mr Asano."

"Not being in the best light is kind of my thing," Jason told him.

"It involved the goddess of Knowledge, a respect for privacy, a tub of Togetherness Jelly and a sack of raisins," Shade said. "On a personal level, I would prefer not to expound on the details."

"Fine, Jason acceded. "But you know that excessive and outlandish descriptions of things is part of my charm."

"You have charm?" Farrah asked.

"Are you kidding?" Travis asked. "Back on Earth, he's a sex symbol."

Jason and Farrah both stopped dead. They turned to look at Travis, brought up short by their stopping.

"What?" Travis asked.

"A sex symbol?" Jason asked sceptically.

"Yes."

"Me?" Jason asked.

"Him?" Farrah asked, prompting Jason to turn to her.

"You know, I've got the incredulity covered," he told her.

"No, this much incredulity is a two-person job."

"That's a little hurtful. People are attracted to power."

"I shoot lava!"

"You're a sex symbol too," Travis said. "Not as big as Jason, but that's just an exposure thing. You're frequently paired together, especially if you do an image search with the safe search off—"

"NOPE," Jason boomed, cutting him off.

"Are you sure it's him more than me?" Farrah asked.

"It depends on the specifics," Travis said. "I know his body pillows sell a *lot* more."

"Body pillows?" Jason asked. "You seem suspiciously well-informed on this topic."

"If you don't mind," Liara cut in, "we're on a schedule."

"We are?" Jason asked.

"I told you that there were two things on the agenda," Liara told him. "One is the materials provided by us and House de Varco. The other is a scheduled water-link call."

"With whom?" Jason asked.

Despite her exhortations for the group to keep moving, Liara led them to collect materials before the scheduled remote meeting. She guided them to a secure storage centre on the first basement level, just underground. They saw no one along the way, which was not strange in the lower levels, based on Jason's previous visits. Once they reached the first basement level, the absence of people was more notable, and the lack of sense suppression allowed Jason to detect others in a wide area. Based on the pattern of people, he was certain that Liara had their path cleared for them.

Liara, walking beside Jason, gave him an assessing look.

"What?" he asked.

"Your senses. You're projecting them very cleanly."

“I’ve been working on it, but it’s still early days. It’ll be years before I’m even approaching a silver-rank version of Lord Pensinata.”

“You realise that most people would find the idea of anyone comparing themselves to Amos Pensinata’s aura abilities quite laughable.”

“If I worried about what people thought was and wasn’t possible, my world would have been annihilated. Next to that, what is some aura training?”

Liara’s thoughts drifted to her husband being trapped in an underwater complex with gold-rank enemies pounding on the door. If Jason hadn’t found a way to portal from a place where portalling wasn’t possible, she would be a widow.

“Thank you, Jason,” she said quietly.

“No worries,” he said with a smile. He didn’t need to ask what her thanks were for.

As they approached their destination, Jason sensed a presence he recognised and stopped.

“Hector de Varco?” he asked Liara.

“You were warned that any family with enough power and influence would find out what you were really doing if they looked hard enough. Did you think the de Varco family wouldn’t be looking at you hard after what happened?”

“I suppose not,” Jason said.

They entered the basement warehouse where crates, sacks and barrels were piled up. There were two people present; Hector de Varco and a gold-rank woman. She had the look shared by many gold rankers of seeming around thirty at a glance, but with an uncanny agelessness, especially in the eyes. She wore practical adventuring leathers, with a sword on her hip. She reminded Jason of Sophie with her tied back hair and sense of readiness to spring into lethal action.

The woman moved to meet the group while Hector remained where he was, looking slightly cowed. Jason could sense Hector’s wariness of him and the woman.

“So, this is Jason Asano,” the woman said.

“And this is some random lady,” Jason shot back. “We meet at last.”

“Do you think that your childish antics impress anyone?” she asked him.

“No, they’re just for fun,” Jason said. “I don’t much care what random people think about me.”

“You are not here to vent your frustration, Lady Astasia,” Liara said. “You are here to fulfil a wager.”

"There is something that needs to be settled first," Astasia said. "This boy may have won his duel, but by the means of necromancers and soul-warpers. Who knows what foul tricks he knows and where he learned them?"

"I know," Liara said. "That should be sufficient to lay any concerns you have, if not to rest, then into a discrete silence."

"We never saw what he can do outside of his illicit powers," Astasia said. "What assurance do I have of his true strength? If he gets bested by some worthless fool, what does that say of my son, who lost to him? That is the perception, even if the duel was hardly legitimate."

"I didn't seek out you or your family," Jason said. "Your son came looking for trouble, so you have no grounds to blame me for his ability to find it."

"You didn't have to handle the fight the way you did," Astasia said.

"No," Jason agreed. "But your son came to me because he had a point to make. It turns out that I had a point to make as well. I made mine better."

Jason and Astasia's auras clashed as they started at one another.

"I will test you," Astasia said, her hand drifting to the sword at her hip. "We shall see if you should be left free to roam about with the potential to harm my son's reputation."

Jason knew, that for all his aura strength, he was only equal to the trashiest of gold rankers. He still fell short of true elites, which he immediately understood as he felt Liara's aura unleashed in full force for the first time. Cold and sharp, it made the conflict between his and Astasia's orders look like the squabbling of children.

"Lady Astasia," Liara said, her voice carrying the same knife-edge warning as her aura. "This is not your house. This is the Storm Kingdom and this is the Adventure Society, which means that it is *my* house. You were allowed to come here as a courtesy, and my courtesy is now exhausted. You will give Mr Asano what you owe him and Mr Asano will keep his mouth shut and not provoke you or your family any further. Isn't that right, Mr Asano?"

"Yes ma'am."

Astasia looked at Liara for a long time before finally speaking.

"People were starting to talk about you going soft, Liara."

Liara walked up to Astasia until they were face to face, almost touching.

"Do you think I'm soft, Asta?" Liara said, her voice barely a whisper.

"No."

"Then leave what you brought and leave this room. And say hello to Gregor for me."

Astasia snorted a surprised laugh.

"We should have dinner sometime, Liara. It's been too long."

"Call my assistant, Rodney. He'll set something up."

Astasia stepped back, turned and nodded at Hector. He moved forward and handed Jason a dimension bag. Jason held out his hand for the other man to take. Hector looked at Jason's hand for a long moment before hesitantly shaking it.

"You didn't lose," Jason told him. "You were caught up in something bigger than yourself and got hammered. It happens to us all."

Hector gave Jason a little nod before backing off without saying anything and he followed his mother out.

"Well, that was fun," Jason said when they were gone. "I assume you knew that she would react like that."

"Astasia was the driving force behind House de Varco's contributions to resource distribution during the monster surge, which were not small. She's a good person who genuinely did her part during the surge, and pushed her house into doing so as well. But she's very protective of her children, and you spiked one of them in the soul."

"So you let her in here to vent?" Jason asked, then shook his head. "No, maybe a little, but that's not enough. You let her in here so that you could stop her when she did vent on me."

"My reputation needs some rehabilitation," Liara said. "The family wants me taking on some of Vesper's old responsibilities, which means more of a public face."

"And people think you've gone soft since your necromancer hunting days. You do seem to have changed a mind, there. She's looking to get on your good side before everyone else realises that it's a good place to be."

"People think that some silver ranker that I was meant to be in charge of made me look like a buffoon in front of the king and His Ancestral Majesty. Your behaviour in the royal viewing box reflected very poorly on me."

"Yeah, I blew it there," Jason said morosely. "Getting involved in Rimaros politics meant so much to me, as well. The effort I put in to insert myself into the affairs of the royal family, all wasted. What was I thinking? It was me who wanted to get involved in—"

"Fine," Liara said. "Your point is taken. You should collect all this before your scheduled call."

"This is all for me?" Jason said, looking around at the crates and sacks and barrels. "Then what's in this dimensional bag?"

He rummaged through and pulled out some orbs, handing one each to Farrah and Travis.

"This is interesting," Travis said, pulling out a device to examine the orb with.

"Is that a tricorder?" Jason asked him.

"No," Travis said unconvincingly, before changing the subject. "This orb is some kind of design matrix. The biggest challenge when I designed the guns for your cloud flask was making sure that it would be able to infer the designs from the materials fed into it. These things allow for significantly more sophisticated outcomes, which I guess you need. Reworking the whole boat is more complex than running out the cannons."

"You should talk to House de Varco if you're interested," Farrah said. "Maybe they'll be willing to trade some secrets. I'll bet you they'll climb over themselves to learn some magitech tricks."

"Sounds like you two will be having fun here in Rimaros," Jason said.

"I think the biggest challenge," Farrah told him, "will be getting anyone to work with us. We have to need find people that you didn't aggravate."

"What are you talking about?" Jason asked. "People love me."

"Can we please just go?" Liara asked.

"Liara," Jason said. "People love me right?"

"Well," Liara said, "I've comprehensively studied your activities and you've done a lot of impressive things for many, many people. Yet, all the evidence points to everyone wanting to kill you, have you killed, kidnap you, ostracise you, hand you over to Builder to get your soul taken over..."

"You could have just said no," Jason said sullenly, then raised his hand, palm up. Blood seeped out of his skin, coagulating into the form of a leech with terrifying rings of lamprey teeth.

"You love me, don't you Colin?"

The leech unleashed a hideous screech that sounded like a clothes hanger shoved into an overcharged garbage disposal.

"That means yes," Jason said.

While the Magic Society operated the water-link infrastructure and the majority of the water-link chambers, major families all had chambers of their own. The Adventure Society likewise maintained several chambers with additional security measures to prevent eavesdropping. The Magic Society regularly assured the Adventure Society that they had no way to tap into those calls.

Jason entered one of the Adventure Society's chambers, which was a large tiled booth. The floor was divided in half, with one side having a dry floor and the other a pool of

water. The dry side had a low, round platform onto which Jason stepped. He waited for around a minute until the water in the pool started floating up, taking on a human shape. Once it had, the water started filling with colour, like ink had been spilled into it. The colours swirled and became more complex until Jason was standing in front of a water clone of Emir Bahadir.

“Jason,” the clone said with a grin. “I hear you’ve been renovating that cloud flask I gave you.”