

## Chapter 610

### Following Your Convictions to Your Death

Jason, Liara and Zareen were sitting at a table, with Hector de Varco standing in front of them. It was already drawing attention, even if people couldn't hear through the invisible privacy screen. Hector was a larger man than his relative, Lancet, and less polished. His hair was trimmed short instead of a sculpted coiffure, with broad shoulders and an outfit that, while tailored, lacked the same flatteringly painstaking fit. Hector also lacked the gold hair of Lancet, instead sporting a deep, shining copper in his eyes and hair.

Jason and the princesses shared a look.

"Young Master de Varco," Liara said. "The king personally and specifically asked Mr Asano to refrain from duelling in his ballroom."

"Then we can take it elsewhere, milady. I am happy to let Mr Asano choose the venue."

"That is only the beginnings of our concerns," Liara told him.

"Indeed," Jason agreed. "I was just telling the princesses here that I was quite satisfied with how things turned out. I'm not going to accept a duel just because you aren't happy with your family come out looking when they came looking for me."

"You did nothing, Mr Asano," Hector said. "Lancet is the one who hurt the reputation of our house. I wish to you show you, and all the people who saw his shameful display, that the de Varco family knows how to stand, be it in victory or defeat."

Jason narrowed his eyes.

"You don't expect to win," he said.

"I am confident in my abilities," Hector said. "But I do not fear defeat. A failure you survive is but a stepping stone to the next success."

"Your motivations are irrelevant," Liara said. "There's no way—"

"I have conditions," Jason said.

"No, you do not," Liara told him.

"Princess," Jason said, "while I ever value your counsel, the challenge was made to me. The decision is mine."

There was a delicate reverberation of his aura in Jason's authoritative tone, giving it a weight that even the gold-rank princess could not ignore.

"Firstly," Jason said to Hector, "it has to be tonight. I don't have time to be running around after every noble house that wants to put me in a fight. I have gods and great astral beings lining up for that already. Second, you need the king to approve. I've already

caused one commotion and I have no intention of forcing him to take things in hand a second time. I'm aware that adventurers of non-elite backgrounds are given leeway in etiquette, but I'm not that bereft of courtesy. Thirdly, I'm going to need some incentive. What you're proposing is a one-sided game. So long as you take your lumps without wetting yourself, you get the good showing for your house that you're looking for, win or lose. I, on the other hand, get nothing, win or lose. I don't need to prove myself to the people here. The only reason I showed up is to demonstrate that I'm not some lunatic who's going to start an interdimensional invasion again."

"Again?" Zareen asked.

"Pretend you didn't hear that," Jason told, then turned back to Hector.

"In short, mate, what's in it for me? And don't say pride or honour, because I have no interest in either."

Hector frowned in thought for a moment before his eyes snapped up to meet Jason's.

"Mr Asano, how familiar are you with House de Varco?"

"If I was counting the minutes since I heard about you, I'd run out of fingers and toes, but not by much. Princess Liara said you were traders."

"At the risk of contradicting the princess, Mr Asano, while we do an amount of trade, it's a corollary to our primary endeavour, which is the construction of vehicles. Everything from wagons to ships to airships; even exotic flying vessels for private buyers."

"I'm already good for transport, mate."

"Yes," Hector said. "You possess a cloud flask. But as I said, my family creates all manner of transport."

"You're offering me another cloud flask?"

"No. While the creation of such a vehicle is an ambition my family is working towards, we are not there yet. We have managed some more limited cloud constructs, a true cloud flask remains in the realm of ambition. But our progress has produced a by-product that you may find appealing."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"A cloud flask can take a vehicle form," Hector said. "But those forms are basic. That's fine for a static construct, like a cloud house, but vehicles are more dynamic. The inherent property of a cloud flask is to take on materials to expand its capabilities. In their studies of cloud flasks, my family had developed the means to harness that effect. With the right materials and design matrix, a cloud flask can replicate the finest vessels that my family produces. And they, Mr Asano, are some of the finest vessels in the world."

Jason looked to Liara, who gave him a confirming nod. He then turned back to Hector and leaned forward in his chair.

"I'll admit that sounds interesting."

"I know for a fact that we have several such design matrices sitting around as the results of our ongoing experiments into cloud constructs. If you agree to this duel, I will offer you the design and materials for a land vessel. If you win, I will offer you the same for an air vessel."

"How much material are we talking about here?" Jason asked.

"I'm talking about the raw materials to build an entire airship from scratch, Mr Asano. A small one. My understanding is that you won't be able to produce the kind of massive skyships cloud flasks are known for producing until gold rank."

Jason remembered his first look at Emir's cloud ship, the size of a massive ocean liner.

"That is acceptable," he said, "but I have one more condition: It can't just be you. You have to bring three companions."

"You want to fight four of us alone?"

"No, I'll be bringing companions of my own. If I take a second opportunity to kick the crap out of someone and don't invite my friend Sophie, she'll kick the crap out of me."

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"Miss Hurin," Trenchant Moore said. Farrah looked at the tall, lean, pale man with dark hair, angular features and bright blue eyes. A little too blue, in fact. She guessed that, like Jason, his eyes had diverged from their original state.

"Mr Moore," Farrah said. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I have heard that you will be staying with us in Rimaros after your friend and his team have all left."

"For a time."

"I am... that is good."

"Wow," Farrah said. "You're really smooth with the ladies. Come on, Stretch. I don't think Jason is going to kill anyone on the dance floor, so we're probably fine taking a spin."

She grabbed his hand and dragged him in that direction as he trailed behind.

"Stretch?"

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Jason and Hector approached the platform atop which was a lounge area for the core members of the royal family. There wasn't a lot of lounging taking place, however, with the presence of Soramir plainly reducing the family's ability to relax. Hector was even more

nervous as they approached, only four people looking unperturbed. Two were diamond rankers; Soramir and Zila Rimaros. One was Jason, who would not have looked out of place strolling a market with his easygoing stride. The Storm King was neither relaxed nor intimidated, playing up the stern-but-benevolent monarch rather than taking it easy with family.

There were no guards at the platform. Anyone who made trouble there would either be a peer of Dawn's or swiftly scraped off the polished floor by palace stewards. Even the most casual observer noticed that no one approached the platform without a very distinct purpose. Jason reflected on the contrast between that and the people approaching him earlier at the event, before he started talking about blood duels in the middle of a society ball.

Jason didn't hesitate as he entered the platform's privacy screen, which started at the short steps leading to the platform. Hector had been rather bold earlier, but the pinnacle members of the royal family intimidated him in a way that even the gold-rank Princess Liara did not.

"Come on, bloke," Jason encouraged as he made his way up the steps, turning his attention to Soramir and the Storm King, whose name he still didn't know. He just knew that he was Zara's father.

"G'day again, your kingness," Jason said, then nodded to Soramir. "G'day Soramir; it's been a minute."

Hector, who had already dropped to one knee, had the look of a man trying to figure out how to shuffle very quickly on one knee away from the madman next to him.

"I had rather expected," the Storm King said, "that our last conversation would be the end of you making commotions at this event, Mr Asano."

"Then you might want to skip my invite next time," Jason said. "The more I try to have a nice, quiet time, the more it ends up being one thing after another. I tried to have a simple barbecue to meet the neighbours when I moved into town, and these two showed up. Uninvited, no less."

Jason gestured at Zila and Soramir with a pointed finger. Jason hadn't seen Soramir in some time, since he was hurt escaping the underwater complex. It was plain that many members of royalty looking on were not happy about Jason's insouciance, but they were not going to speak up when the king and the diamond rankers were willing to tolerate it, even if they failed to understand why.

"Would it hurt you to show a little deference, Jason?" Soramir asked lightly.

"Would it hurt you to offer a bloke a seat?" Jason asked. "Addressing the deference issue would involve delving into my thoughts of the relative merits of different forms of governance. I don't think this is the time and place for that particular debate."

"While I genuinely say I would find that fascinating," the Storm King said, "You're right that this is not the place. Which begs the question of why you have approached me, along with this much more respectful young man from House de Varco. Given our last conversation, you make for an unexpected pairing."

Jason prodded the still kneeling Hector with his foot.

"This is your show, bloke. Maybe stand up and tell the nice king what you want for Christmas?"

Hector was a silver ranker and didn't sweat, but he felt like his body might figure out how from pure nervousness. As Jason conversed with the royals, Hector realised that his assumptions about the man he had challenged were way off. Not only was he speaking with his Majesty and his Ancestral Majesty in a way that Hector would only describe as suicidal, but *he was getting away with it*.

How was Asano not wilting under the attention of all that power? Just the passive aura interactions from having two diamond rankers pay passing attention to him were making the hair on his arms stand on end, and they were restraining themselves. Anxiously, under the now focused attention of the King and royal family, Hector got to his feet. He steeled himself, planting his feet as he raised his eyes to look at the king.

"Your Majesty, after my house failed to comport itself in a manner that reflects well on its place in your kingdom, I took it upon myself to rectify the circumstances."

"And how did you seek to go about that task?"

"I challenged Jason Asano to a duel, your highness. However, Mr Asano refused, citing his respect for you and your desire that this gathering remains a peaceful one. He said he would not accept unless my challenge could be made with your approval."

"And why would I give that approval? You want to have a bloody fight in the middle of my ballroom, in the middle of my ball?"

"Perhaps you could suggest an alternate venue, Your Majesty," Jason suggested. "Somewhere roomy, since it's actually going to be four duels. Should you approve?"

"Four duels?" the king asked.

"I thought that if we're going to do it, why not put on a show? So, if you have a big room somewhere that maybe you don't mind us breaking some bits off of, we could just quietly bunk off and leave your guests to their lovely evening."

"And who else would be participating in this series of duels?" Soramir asked.

"The guy who's better at me with swords, the woman who's better than me with fists and the guy who's better than me at talking to people like you."

"That would be Rufus Remore and Sophie Wexler," Soramir said. "Not to put too fine a point on it, Mr Asano, but that last description does little to narrow it down."

Jason let out an easy laugh and pointed. There was no shortage of people watching, despite not hearing anything, having seen Jason and Hector approach the king.

"It's the tall, broad-shouldered bloke that is suddenly very aghast that I'm pointing him out to you."

"Perhaps," Soramir said to the king, "we can make some entertainment of it. The old duelling arena has seating for an audience."

"Wait, you guys have a duelling arena?" Jason asked. "You should have brought that up when the other guy was crying about mirage chambers and saved us some trouble."

"It has gone unused for many years," the king said.

"It was installed only a century or so after the kingdom was founded," Soramir explained. "Back when I still ruled the Storm Kingdom, mirage chambers were yet to be invented."

"Duelling was already on the decline by the time they were," the king continued, "but the safety they offered resulted in something of a resurgence."

"I happen to agree with Mr Asano that there are no duels in mirage chambers," Soramir said. "They're just performances for people pretending to have courage."

"Performances that let the hot-headed young members of the Houses play their little games without starting blood feuds," the king countered. "Not everything has to be about following your convictions to your death."

"As Mr Asano has done exactly that several times," Soramir said, "I don't think you will have any more luck of having him agree than you would me. So you might as well reopen the arena and let the ball attendees enjoy some sport."

"Explain to me," the king said, "how failing to convince you and Mr Asano of anything means I have to allow duels to take place."

Jason opened his mouth to respond and then stopped, frowning.

"What the..."

"Is there a problem, Mr Asano?" Soramir asked.

"I figured someone would try and break into my house while everyone was off at a party, but it just had to be while I was talking to the king, didn't it. Sorry, Your Maj; I better take a look at this."

“Your Maj?” Hector asked, dumbfounded as Jason dug a hand into his shirt and pulled out a necklace. It had two amulets on it, one being his Amulet of the Dark Guardian, and the other being his shrunken cloud flask. Cloud stuff came spilling out of the tiny flask and formed a vertical ring the size of a portal. It wasn’t portal energy that shimmered into being, however, but an image of Jason’s pagoda. Four people dressed in black were on one of the lower floor balconies, where they had laid down a board and were drawing a ritual on it.

“Mr Asano?” the king asked.

“Yes?” Jason absently answered as he watched the image.

“How are you maintaining any connection to your cloud building through the very significant defences around this sky island?”

Jason went still, then turned his head to look at the king with a friendly smile.

“Uh... I’m not.”

“Then what exactly is this?” the king asked, gesturing at the floating ring.

“Art?”