

Chapter 616

A Good Friend to Have

Estella Warnock still thought of it as her grandfather's house, even though he was now gone. After the death of her parents, Warwick Warnock had retired from adventuring to raise Estella, never pushing her to adventure the way he had her father. Warwick had learned that lesson at the price of his son's life, and had been determined to avoid the same mistake with his granddaughter.

Warwick had only ever pushed Estella to find her passion, whatever that might be. If it turned out to be adventuring, he would have supported it, but to his relief, it had not been the case. The death of her father had strangled any desire to follow that path in the crib.

Warwick hadn't loved the path that Estella did eventually choose, as a spy for hire for shady people in the city, but he never tried to dissuade her from it. What he did do, from time to time, was try to nudge her in the direction of using her skills for something a little more responsible. That was how she ended up scouting for monsters that Jason Asano or other adventurers were sent after during the Builder attack.

At the same time as she was doing a rare bit of civic duty, her grandfather had gone off to fight one of the fortress cities, but never came home. They told her he died like a hero. It was the same thing they said about her father.

All of this came at a time when she was realising that her chosen profession was not working out. She enjoyed the challenge of it, but her sketchy clients always wanted more challenge than she did. To them, she was a cheap option for spying on those that would otherwise require an expensive and troublesome high-ranker to keep tabs on.

She had left the job after several hours playing cat and mouse with Asano's damnable shadow familiar. She had been uncertain at the time about whether or not to go back and what changes to make. The loss of her grandfather had left her uninspired to return at all, and she'd been languishing in aimlessness after moving back into his empty house.

Of all people, Asano had been something of a comfort. He was neighbourly and it was refreshing that he didn't want anything from her, at least until he did. His offer of employment had sounded suspiciously like adventuring by proxy. On the other hand, it would be nice to work for someone at least partially invested in her wellbeing, compared to Havi Estos and his ilk. They were all about benefits exchange, where her interactions with Asano and companions had shown that they genuinely cared for one another.

That kind of genuine companionship was something she'd never had. Her parents died before she really gained an appreciation of trust, and only her grandfather had ever earned it. There was a distinct appeal to becoming part of a group where that trust wasn't just a factor, but the norm. For all that they regularly jabbed one another, Asano and his friends breathed in camaraderie like air.

She'd been considering Asano's offer for some time, but remained uncertain. It was a path forward at a time when she felt directionless, but should she jump at the first thing that came along? Her instincts told her that it was what her grandfather would want. Despite his nudges in how she should utilise her skills, his only outright complaint was how solitary her life was.

Late one evening she was mulling the issue over, checking if expensive liquor would help resolve her indecision. It hadn't any of the other times she tried it, but she prided herself on professionalism. She had to be thorough in checking.

She turned her head, looking at the wall as her magical senses moved beyond it. Something almost undetectable was approaching; one of Asano's shadowy familiars. She'd regularly felt the shadow-being's many bodies roaming around within the scope of her prodigious senses since moving close to Asano's home, and was beginning to suspect that the familiar was using her for practise.

On this occasion, Shade made his way to her front door. He knew she was aware of his presence and did not knock, and instead, waiting outside her doorway. She got up, moved to the door and opened it.

"Something I can do for your boss?" she asked the shadow man in her doorway. "Isn't he at some big fancy party?"

"He is, indeed, Miss Warnock. I have come to discuss the offer of employment he made you."

"I've been deliberating."

"You have, by my estimate, one hour and forty minutes to conclude your deliberations or the offer will be revoked."

She frowned.

"Tell your boss that I don't like being pushed?"

"He is not pushing, Miss Warnock; he's leaving. Our full entourage will be gone within the next two hours."

"Did something happen at the party?"

“Mr Asano was attending,” Shade said. “So, yes, but my understanding is that was tangentially related at best. He informed me that the decision to leave tonight was centred on a friend helping him to remember that which mattered and that which did not.”

“Sounds like a good friend to have.”

“Quite so, Miss Warnock. If you are willing to tolerate a piece of unsolicited advice, I would point out that you should perhaps consider transitioning to a position where you can make friends of your own.”

The arena ready-areas were essentially large locker rooms, with projectors on one wall so anyone inside could watch the duels. Liara was alone in Jason's ready room, having just watched him not so much win a duel as look at it sternly until it slunk away in shame. She knew enough about him to know he had used a soul attack, but even her gold rank senses had failed to pick up the spike of aura he used to do so. The sheer power and precision of it, at his rank, was almost as terrifying as the attack itself.

Fully as terrifying was Asano's willingness to make soul attacks not just in public, but in front of a prestigious and attentive audience. Soul attacks were extremely rare, almost never coming from essence abilities. They were most notoriously associated with the kind of villains that Liara had spent most of her adventuring career hunting down.

She had asked Jason to be serious and demonstrate that authority could reign him in. He had told her that it was a bad idea, and now she finally believed him. She had never imaged that he would fulfil her request by attacking someone with an attack of such sudden, violating brutality that Soramir Rimaros had to step in and stop him.

The arena doors opened to admit Jason, still in his sinister blood robes and uncanny cloak. He almost seemed to be progressing in a slow glide due to his smooth gait and the cloak obscuring his feet. The doors closed behind him as Jason moved towards her.

"The way you move using the cloak is unusual," she observed.

“When I was iron-rank, I spent no small amount of time developing movement techniques that incorporated various minor aspects of my powers, methodologies taken from the Order of the Reaper. It helped me to travel quickly through the Greenstone Delta on foot while navigating difficult terrain and maximising my endurance. Over time, it became habitual while I was wearing my cloak.”

A dark mist shrouded Jason, dispersing after just a moment. When it did, his robes and cloak had been replaced by his previous formalwear. The absence of his sinister adventuring attire did not alleviate the heavy air surrounding him. He wasn't projecting the

polite subdued aura that etiquette called for. His aura was barely detectable at all, and that was by a gold-ranker standing right in front of him.

"Miss Hurin told me that you are leaving tonight."

"Yes."

"You were meant to leave with His Ancestral Majesty. Make a show of you going off into the cosmos together."

"He can come to the cloud house and put on a show if he likes."

"Soramir Rimaros doesn't go to you, Jason. You go to him."

"That hasn't been my experience."

As much as she might want to, Liara couldn't argue the point. She had been raised to venerate the absentee figure of the Storm Kingdom's founder, but meeting the real thing had upended her expectations. He was a lot more casual and relaxed than the figure depicted in history books, which, she supposed, was something you could do when you didn't answer to anyone. The fact that Soramir and Jason were quite alike in this regard was not lost on her.

"I've been making arrangements as best I can to facilitate your departure," she told him. "Vidal Ladiv is bringing everything you'll need from the Adventure Society to us here. Amos Pensinata and his nephew have been notified and are en route to your building. Carlos Quilido is also making rushed preparations, with no small number of complaints over the short notice. I was not sure if you had decided to take someone from the Rimaros family with you, be it Zara or... my daughter."

"I'm taking neither; we have complications enough. From almost the first moment I arrived here, House Rimaros has been pushing itself into my affairs or pulling me into theirs. Now that I'm leaving your family's kingdom, you will find my patience for that kind of intrusion has sharply declined."

Despite the heaviness of the moment, Liara couldn't help herself.

"This was you being patient?"

Jason broke into a laugh, breaking the tension

"Believe it or not, yes. You're probably better off without me."

"No," Liara said. "You're trouble in a clearly labelled box, Asano, but you may just be worth that trouble. Without you, my husband would be dead. If your friend Belinda was still in Vitesse, the Order of Redeeming Light would still be a threat. If not for your friends Travis and Dawn, the battle with the Builder's city-fortresses would have gone very differently. If you hadn't somehow made the Builder pack up and leave, the invasion would have continued for as much as five or six more weeks."

“Princess, that’s just how things go for me. The reason I’m leaving is in the slim hope that maybe it won’t be, if even for a little while. I do have to save my home planet again, but I’m hoping I can do that on the down-low.”

The door leading into the hallways around the arena opened and Vidal Ladiv came in.

“Good evening, milady. I apologise, Mr Asano; I didn’t want to interrupt your duel preparations. They told me it was about to start, so I thought it would be underway by now. I didn’t want to come in until the duel had begun, and I didn’t sense anyone but you in here, Princess.”

Seeing someone who was visibly in front of them but absent from their magical senses was unnerving to most essence users, and a large part of the mystique high-rankers held. Vidal showed no sign of being perturbed on his face, although both Liara and Jason could feel it in his aura.

“It’s fine, Mr Ladiv,” Liara said. “The duel is already over.”

This time surprise did show on his face.

“I would have expected it to take longer,” he said. “Hector de Varco can turn himself into stone, isolate afflictions into small parts of his body and tear them off, replacing them with stone from the environment. It’s a rather unusual form of regeneration that works very well against affliction specialists. Or is supposed to.”

“Mr Asano decided to forgo afflictions for another approach,” Liara said. “You can ask him about it later, if you have the courage. Right now, he needs the documentation from the Adventure Society. Did you get everything in order?”

“I did, milady. Rodney was a great help.”

“You know my assistant?”

“Yes, milady. Very well, in fact.”

“He never mentioned,” Liara said.

“You’re a princess,” Jason said. “He didn’t think you’d care.”

Liara looked at Jason, then back to Vidal, whose face gave reluctant confirmation. She frowned unhappily.

“Mr Ladiv,” Jason said to the man who increasingly looked in need of rescue. “What do you have for me?”

“Give him what he needs, Mr Ladiv,” Liara said. “I’m going to go help extract Mr Asano’s companions, so they don’t end up in any further political messes after the duels.”

Vidal nodded, moving over to Jason and taking a file folder from a dimensional pouch as Liara departed.

"This is the documentation relating to your Adventure Society memberships," Vidal said, and handed over the folder. "The paperwork for your real identity and your new identity, with the alias you have chosen, is all here. By the time the sun comes up, these will all have been updated in the Adventure Society central record."

Vidal then took out a small box.

"These are your new badges, with the updates rank for your real identity and the false identity."

Vidal opened the case to reveal two silver-rank Adventure Society badges, sitting on the padded lining of the box. The badge on the right had a single star while the one on the left had three. In both cases, however, they differed from the solid five-pointed stars that Jason was familiar with. The single star on the right badge had a circle around it, while the three stars on the left badge were not solid stars, but pentagrams.

"What's going on here?" Jason asked, pointing them out.

"This," Vidal said, indicating the single star, "is the standard marker for an auxiliary adventurer. It means that they can't take solo missions; they have to be attached to a team. It's for auxiliaries that can hold their own in a fight, if necessary, and means they qualify for a share of contract awards if they participate in combat or, more frequently, other dangerous activities. An intrusion expert might need to join the team if they're breaking into some fortified lair, for example. They might not fight the things in there, but they're still going into the dangerous place to open locks and bypass traps."

"So, it's for when the cook is secretly super combat guy and there's a naked lady asleep in the cake."

"I'm afraid you've lost me there, sir."

"Don't call me sir. Call me Jason, or Asano, if you're more comfortable with that. Call me H.R. Pufnstuf if you like, but not sir. I'm not in charge of you."

"No, you're definitely in charge of me, sir."

"You're an independent liaison from the Adventure Society."

"Sir, I'll be with your team and your friends in your cloud construct. While I'm confident that most, if not all of the rumours I've heard about that building are wrong, there are people I'm very scared of who are scared of it. Add that to you being suspicious of me as an outsider and I'm not entirely certain you won't kill and dispose of me if I stumble onto the wrong secret. You're in charge of me, if only from the perspective of my not being an idiot."

"That's fair," Jason acknowledged. "Alright, tell me about the other badge."

"Well," Vidal said in the tone of someone familiar with the term 'shoot the messenger,' "you're definitely a three-star adventurer. Three stars means dealing with contracts related to high-level politics. If Soramir Rimaros is asking about your star rating, that pretty much answers the question right there. But, the Adventure Society is also aware that you sometimes feel compelled to act against your own best interests when your principles are involved. While that is certainly admirable, the society wanted to de-incentivise you flashing a three-star badge that, officially, is in another dimension."

"You were told to say that pretty much word for word, weren't you?"

"I was, sir, yes."

"So, what do these modified stars mean?"

"They don't, strictly speaking, mean anything. This star design was made for you, and you alone."

"Oh," Jason said. "That's actually kind of clever. If I go trying to use the authority of a three-star to go taking shortcuts for my team, the idiosyncratic badge will mean that an Adventure Society branch will dig deeper, opening up the whole can of worms where I'm meant to be off in another dimension. Basically, they guaranteed that any time I use my badge it will be a whole mess. They want to reduce the temptation to use my star rating to take shortcuts, in the hope that I'll seek out more nuanced methods first."

"Very astute, sir, which I imagine to be how you got those three stars in the first place."

"Don't patronise me, Ladiv, or I'll throw you overboard while we're in the middle of the ocean."

"I have the water essence, sir, so I would be quite fine in that scenario."

"Of course you would; I'm not going to murder you for patronising me. I'll just make you run alongside the vehicle for an hour or two."