

## Chapter 601

### This Doesn't Feel Glorious

There was a rocky outcropping on the southern mainland, well beyond the border of Storm Kingdom territory. Towering over the jungle, it overlooked a sweeping river and was an excellent landmark to portal to. A portal opened as someone did just that, and adventurers started emerging. Emerging first were silver rank guild adventurers, followed by Princess Liara and, finally, a visibly nervous Autumn Leal.

Autumn looked around at the guild team assigned to watch over her familiar ritual. They were from the Sapphire Crown guild, whose bronze-rankers wouldn't give her a second glance on the street, even with her silver rank. They would be polite if they ever spoke to her, sure, but why would they? And all of that was ignoring the gold-rank princess.

Liara directed them to start descending the outcropping.

"Don't think about them," Liara told Autumn in a calming voice. "My understanding is that if you aren't looking to attract certain varieties of carnivore, a calm mind is best for familiar rituals."

"I don't understand what's going on," Autumn said. "I mean, I understand why I'm here, but why are you here?"

"Mr Asano was unhappy that people coming after him were going to disrupt your familiar ritual, so he told me to take you to another site while he explains things to the people in question."

"He can tell *you* to do things?"

"No, but it doesn't seem to stop him."

She didn't point out that he also told the Builder to do things, which was really how they ended up in their current circumstances.

"Mr Asano's aura is rather strong," Liara continued. "Strong enough that even I can't read his emotions. So when enough anger slipped through that I picked up on it, it was worth paying attention to. It meant he was probably going to do something drastic, and knowing there was no stopping him, I thought to it best to steer him as best I could. Fortunately, there are procedures for this."

"For what, exactly?"

"After every monster surge, there's a lot of guild recruitment as quality adventurers the guilds overlooked demonstrate their ability. Many great adventurers come from outside of the guild and aristocratic families, and the surge is where a lot of them get noticed.

Unfortunately, every surge also brings adventurers that failed to distinguish themselves but are unwilling to accept that. They pick someone who did and try to make an example of them. Watching out for this very thing is how we caught wind of what was happening with you and stepped in. Asano is, after all, such an obvious target.”

“But even with moving my ritual, won't they still go after Jason?”

“Yes. Standard procedure is to warn whomever they've targeted, and then let them. We've found that letting people bite down on the rock is the most effective object lesson.”

Autumn nodded.

“I know you're only helping me because of Jason, but I'm still not sure how I ended up here. How did I go from standing next to him in line for a scutwork delivery job to all this?”

She gestured at the other adventurers and Liara herself.

“That was Asano's choice.” Liara explained. “I've studied Asano's history as extensively as anyone can, I suspect. He has a habit of going a long way for relative strangers, especially if he feels that they've been wronged on account of his actions. You have met his team members, Wexler and Callahan?”

“Sophie and Belinda? Yes.”

“They were thieves when they met Asano. He and Clive Standish caught them on a contract, only to discover they were passing them off into a fate much worse than thievery warranted. It was quite political, very corrupt and extremely unpleasant. Asano undertook actions I can only describe as characteristically drastic and two thieves went from a disastrous fate to elite adventurers. Asano made some rather significant enemies in the process and ultimately paid a hefty price, but I don't believe he regrets it. Despite a cost I'm not sure I can even empathise with the severity of.”

“Is he going to pay a cost for helping me?”

“Not unless, as I said, he's overestimated himself. You met Asano on a fortress town delivery?”

“Yes, but it was clear things weren't normal. There was a gold ranker on board, and not just an ordinary one. He said it was because of pirates, but you don't send the Siege Sword to guard a supply run from pirates that could be anywhere. He was there to test Jason.”

“Yes, he was,” Liara agreed. “I'm afraid that I am ultimately the reason for your acquaintance with Asano. I put him on that airship, although it was his Ancestral Majesty who assigned Trenchant Moore. I was using Asano as bait to catch some Builder cultists.”

“His Ancestral Majesty, as in...”

“Soramir Rimaros, yes.”

Liara looked at Autumn.

“I'm not helping you calm down, am I, Miss Leal?”

“Not really, no. Did you catch the Builder cultists?”

“We got Purity zealots instead. There's no shortage of people willing to go after Asano, which is what has brought us to this predicament. There are only a handful of regions ideal for seeking out familiar-appropriate magical frogs, which is why we had to portal you to a more distant one. The one you were registered to visit is currently crawling with opportunists about to find that their opportunity is eagerly awaiting them.”

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Eleven people were moving through the jungle on the Storm Kingdom's western mainland. They were in a region hosting a major habitat for magical frogs, around a dozen kilometres from one of the main roadways that Jason had once travelled down on a delivery contract. This was where Autumn Leal had registered as going to perform her familiar bond ritual. It was also the place where two men, Rangel and Tellez, had led their teams.

“And to think you said this helmet wasn't worth the money, Tellez.”

“It wasn't worth the money, Rangel.”

“We aren't the only ones out here, searching for Asano. This helmet will track him down.”

“Assuming he doesn't have some way to block tracking magic. There are plenty of items and abilities that can do that.”

“The artificer who sold it to me said it would penetrate those kinds of protections.”

“People say all kinds of things, Rangel. My wife said she'd never leave me.”

“Didn't she leave that alchemy vendor for you?”

“What are you saying?”

“I'm saying there's a pattern of behaviour.”

“What kind of pattern is leaving me for a guy who sells umbrellas?”

“Ella left you for an umbrella salesman?”

“During a monster surge, no less. And they aren't even magical umbrellas. They're regular umbrellas!”

Rangel and Tellez were moving through the jungle with their team members in tow. They were hunting Jason Asano, and knowing he would have his own team with them, had grouped together. They had checked and found that Asano's absurdly named Team Biscuit had six, giving them almost two-to-one odds. Not everyone was on-board with the plan, however, and the singular woman in the group spoke up.

“Tellez, we could still back out of this,” she told her team leader.

“Escamilla, you were outvoted.”

“There’s a Geller on Asano’s team.”

“Not one of the local ones; I’ve never heard of him. And not every Geller is so amazing. Their reputation is overblown.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” Escamilla said. “And Gellers don’t usually let just anyone on their team.”

“I haven’t heard of anyone on this one’s team,” Rangel contributed. “Except Asano.”

“Who you hadn’t heard of before,” Escamilla pointed out. “Just because they aren’t known locally doesn’t make them weak.”

“You’re just looking for reasons to not do this,” Tellez told her.

“You’re right. We’re roaming through the jungle, interrupting some poor woman’s familiar ritual to beat the hell out of a fellow adventurer just for the glory. This doesn’t feel glorious, Tellez.”

“Stop griping. We agreed to this as a team.”

“I did some checking around, Tellez. This woman lost her familiar defending Rimaros from the Builder attack.”

“We all defended the city from the Builder attack,” Rangel said.

“Our teams were on standby on Provo, Rangel,” Escamilla said. “We weren’t exactly beating back the cult.”

“Which is why we’re here,” Rangel said. “To get the prestige that was denied us when we were assigned away from the battle.”

“I don’t think it was prestige that we were denied,” Escamilla said. “I think it was casualties. A lot of people died that day. Stronger people than us.”

“That’s what you think, isn’t it?” Tellez asked. “That Asano’s team is stronger than us?”

“I don’t know, Tellez,” she said. “That’s kind of the whole point: we don’t know what we’re walking into. I told you I did some checking around, and I spoke to Team Work Saw.”

“Team Work Saw aren’t worth a damn,” Rangel said.

“They’re a guild team,” Escamilla said.

“Yeah, the worst guild team in Rimaros,” Rangel said. “We could take them easy.”

“I don’t think we should go underestimating any guild team, Rangel,” Tellez said.

“What did you get from them, Milla?”

“They’ve worked with Asano’s team. Said they’re a strange group, but serious business.”

“What did they say about Asano himself?”

“The usual stuff. Don’t mess with an affliction specialist. They said he was kind of an odd one, though. He—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rangel said. “Affliction specialists are nothing. You just punch past their protection and put them down fast.”

“And how many affliction specialists have you ‘put down fast’ Rangel?” Escamilla asked.

“First time for everything.”

In a nearby shadow, Jason was starting to wonder if this entire conversation was some kind of ruse to lure him into a false sense of security.

“That’s what makes this such a good plan,” Tellez said, gesturing at the recording crystal floating over his head. Rangel had an identical one. “We don’t have to fight Asano’s team. Not really. We have the numbers to tie them up long enough to give Asano a beat down. He’s silver rank, so he can take it. And then we disengage and get out. They’re looking for monsters and magical beasts interrupting the ritual, not a sneak attack from two teams of elite adventurers. We blitz, beat, and bolt.”

“Yes, because that’s what elite adventurers do,” Escamilla said. “They record themselves attacking a fellow adventurer for no better reason than to build their reputations. Do you think there won’t be any repercussions from this?”

“We want the repercussions from this,” Tellez said. “Footage of us kicking the goo out of the guy everyone is talking about at the top end of town, the people they’ll be talking about is us. Recrimination from the Adventure Society will only help raise our profile. He has a healer, Milla. No one will be suffering anything that can’t be fixed with a few minutes and a few spells, so it won’t be that bad. We take our lumps and come out the talk of the town.”

“Even assuming that this all goes the way you think it will,” Escamilla said, “I’m not so sure I want to be the subject of that kind of talk. And don’t think it will go just right. When has everything gone just right on a contract, let alone this mess? If we want to end up in the upper echelons of adventurers, Tellez, we can’t be stuck on basic monster hunts, which means star ratings with the Adventure Society. Every famous team is full of two-stars, and most have at least one member with three. We have one member with two stars. Me. But when what we’re doing here comes out – however it goes – my second star is going away. You aren’t afraid of getting demoted because you’re already sitting on one star, but I’m the one with something to lose.”

Tellez stopped walking and turned on Escamilla.

“And there it is,” he said. “Short-term thinking is one thing, but the real problem is that it’s all about you, isn’t it? The unwillingness to sacrifice for the team. The selfishness.”

Escamilla didn’t back off, getting in the face of the man, despite being a head shorter.

“Don’t talk to me about selfishness, Tellez. This whole thing is the embodiment of selfishness. How many people are you willing to hurt to advance yourself? This woman just trying to get a familiar? The team of adventurers we’re attacking? They don’t know about your plan, Tellez, so they won’t be playing for fun. When we hit them, they’re going to hit back. Hard. And not just today, either. We’re making enemies here that we don’t have to.”

Rangel and Tellez loomed over the smaller woman.

“You don’t like it, Escamilla,” Rangel said, “then how about you turn around and go home? We can live without one more damage dealer. If you wanted to have people put up with your crap, you should have gone for guarding or healing powers.”

Escamilla looked to Tellez, waiting, but he said nothing.

“Seriously?” she asked, after a long, tense silence. “You’re going to let an outsider tell a member of *your* team to go and not say a single word in their defence?”

Tellez took on an awkward expression, but then firmed it with resolve.

“You agreed to go along with the team’s decision, Milla.”

“I never thought the team would be this insane!”

“Then why come along at all?”

“Because you’re my team! And I thought that maybe, just maybe, I could convince you to give up on this idiotic plan of yours, Tellez.”

“Actually, it was my plan,” Rangel said. “Well, it was Maldonado’s plan, but I’m the one who stole it. And if we’re going to find Asano before he does, we need to stop standing around yelling at one another and get back to the search. If Asano and his team are anywhere near here, they’ve heard us coming.”

Escamilla glared at him but didn’t respond before turning her gaze back to Tellez.

“If we want to make a name for ourselves,” she asked, “how about we do it with accomplishments instead of stunts?”

“We don’t have enough accomplishments, Milla! The guilds are going to be recruiting now the surge is over, but we didn’t do anything that will stand out. We can’t get into a top guild if no one knows who we are.”

“Look at what we’re doing, Tellez! You think this – *this* – is what great adventurers do?”

“Asano isn’t so great, and his name is on everyone’s lips right now. That’s what makes him the perfect target.”

“We don’t know what Asano is,” she told him. “But what he’s not is out in the jungle, targeting other adventurers to make some kind of point.”

In a nearby shadow, Jason winced, scratching his head awkwardly.

“All this has done is show us who we really are,” Escamilla said. “Every other group that we’re racing to find Asano is the same as us; they’re either in middling guilds or none at all. Maybe the reason we didn’t get the attention of a big guild, Tellez, is that we’re not meant to be in one. Maybe what this whole debacle is really telling us is that this is all we amount to.”

Escamilla felt the atmosphere change and knew she’d made a mistake as the auras around her grew hostile. For the first time since being empowered by essences, she was acutely conscious of being a woman. She was the only one on either team, leaving her in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by men. She stood, tense, unease creeping into her mind when screams rang out as a member of Rangel’s team was dragged into the canopy.