

Chapter 588

Recalibrate Their Expectations

“I want to try opening up some portals,” Jason said as Carlos was about to leave after his latest treatment session. They were standing in the vast atrium, by the large double doors that served as the main entrance.

“I would strongly advise against it,” Carlos told him. “You are largely recovered, but if you push too hard, you could backslide. Keep doing the mana circulation exercises and use your non-dimensional powers. Anything that touches the astral will likely exacerbate the remaining damage and complicate your recovery.”

“But all my non-dimensional powers are very murderous. Are you telling me to go kill someone?”

“You know that I’m not. Look, use your shadow hands and learn how to juggle or something.”

“Juggle? You want me to ride a unicycle, next?”

“I don’t know what that is, but so long as it doesn’t involve dimensional forces, go for it.”

Carlos chuckled at Jason’s aghast expression, opened one of the double doors and left. Outside, a beautiful woman with blue hair was approaching across the lawn.

“Princess Liara,” Carlos greeted as they moved past one another.

“Priest Quilido.”

Inside, Jason looked out at Liara, who stopped just outside the threshold of the pagoda’s doorway.

“Is this an official visit?” Jason asked.

“Yes.”

“How is your husband?”

“Well, thanks to you. He wanted me to convey his gratitude.”

“I have no interest in an official visit. A social one, on the other hand, is very different. Let your husband convey his gratitude in person.”

The door closed itself between them.

Princess Liara and her husband, Baseph, were travelling from Livaros to Arnote in a flying carriage. Theirs was a political marriage, but after several decades and three children, there was a hard-to-match intimacy between them. They had been friends and occasional lovers across the years, but had been growing closer recently.

Liara had spent most of her career hunting down those who violated the Adventure Society's list of restricted activities. In the course of doing so, she had met Carlos a number of times, as his job was to help the victims of those Liara and her team had hunted down. Knowing him was why she had followed Jason's suggestion to bring Carlos in to work with the Order of Redeeming Light prisoners.

When she had been reassigned to the Builder response unit in Rimaros, several years earlier, Liara settled into her home for a longer stretch than she had since her children were young. More time with her husband, this time without a trio of little princes and princesses underfoot, had brought them close.

Their latest time together had come to an end when Baseph agreed to take on the role of administrator of an underwater mining complex. This proved a harrowing choice as it was raided by religious fanatics and Baseph and no small number of his staff had to be extracted by unconventional means.

Jason Asano had done exactly that, at significant cost to himself. The spectacular light and aura show that came directly after was the by-product of efforts to keep him alive in the aftermath. Carlos refused to discuss his patient, but the fact that he was regularly visiting Asano spoke volumes as to how profoundly damaged Jason had been.

Because of how her husband was rescued, Liara knew she owed Jason no small amount of debt. This was complicated by her relationship with Asano, which was a strange one, by her standards. Given who Jason was famously spending time with, it was probably quite ordinary from his perspective.

They had met when she was tasked with using him in anti-Builder operations. At the same time, he was also roped into political machinations managed by Liara's friend and fellow royal, Vesper Rimaros. Events had overtaken them, however, rendering petty political goals pointless and Vesper dead. Her sacrifice had been a key part of saving the island of Livaros from destruction.

Liara had struck up something of a friendship with Asano's familiar, Shade. He had proven to be a communication lynchpin when many other techniques fell short, at least in the time they had to work with. More practical solutions had since been put in place, and she had found herself missing the discreet and polite shadow entity.

Now, Liara was tasked with being the royal family's liaison with Asano again. Following the evacuation of the underwater complex, bizarre events had been surrounding Asano. His strange, changing building had become a fortress and, after much analysis, it was decided that imposing external will on Asano was a bad idea. His building, now a pagoda, was strongly suspected to have strange and powerful protections.

That analysis was partly based on Liara's own experiences. She had been inside the cloud house and felt its power, dormant but deep, like a lake with a monster sleeping at the bottom. But the defences were not the reason she had argued strongly against going in to take Asano.

Liara owed Asano and did not take that debt lightly. He and his team had been critical in the underwater complex rescue, rescuing her husband and even revealing the Order of Redeeming Light's location. They had taken risks and Jason had almost killed himself; the idea of repaying that with what could, at best, be considered heavy-handedness was something she was staunchly against.

That was without even considering the forces Jason was involved with, including the god of Dominion, who had stopped by for what observer reports referred to as a 'casual chat.' Even ignoring that, Liara knew what came of trying to push Jason Asano underfoot. She had very thoroughly gone through his Adventure Society file, the restricted parts included.

For his entire career, and even before, Jason had been dealing with powerful and dangerous people. Time and again, while Asano often paid a price, it was the other side that ended up losing. From blood cultists to crime lords to a Magic Society director to great astral beings; looking down on Jason Asano because of his rank was a demonstrably bad idea.

Even though she understood why, Liara did not appreciate being the one assigned to handle him for the royal family. It meant that she was forced to meet him with an agenda rather than the gratitude that should be the only thing she brought to his door.

"I don't like this," she said, sitting in the carriage next to her husband.

Sitting opposite them were their three children, all silver rank, like their father. Dara was the eldest, and like the middle child, Zareen, had followed their mother into adventuring. The youngest was the only son, Joseph, who was an administrative official with the Amouz family business interests, like his father.

"It's fine," Baseph said, giving Liara's hand a comforting squeeze.

"I don't like that he asked me to bring you before he'd talk to me," Liara said. "It's like he wants a hostage."

"Of course he does," Zareen said. "It's a power play, and one he's smart to make. He's been silver rank for less time than I have and look at what he's caught up in. The people looking at him now are used to just taking what they want from silver-rankers. He needs to recalibrate their expectations so that they approach him from a position of

negotiation instead of making demands. I bet there have already been discussions about going into that building of his and dragging him out.”

Zareen was the physically smaller of the two daughters, not inheriting her mother's height, but she did have the iconic sapphire hair and eyes of the royal family. She was much more interested in politics than her mother and had been close to the politically-savvy Vesper, prior to her death. It had earned Zareen her three-star rating with the Adventure Society, as someone who could take on the most delicate of missions.

“I hate this,” Liara complained. “I’m a hunter, not a politician.”

“If you don’t want to go probing this guy for information, then don’t,” Dara said. “Tell the family you won’t do what they want.”

Dara was a one-star adventurer, and happy to be so. It meant she only qualified for simple monster-hunting missions, which was exactly how she liked it. Even less interested in politics than her mother, she had Liara’s height but Baseph’s dark copper hair and eyes. She was muscular and a highly capable frontline combatant, compared to her tricky sister and stealthy mother.

“Sure, Dara,” Zareen said. “She should go to the king and his ancestral majesty Soramir and tell them that she doesn’t want to do that.”

“I would.”

“We know,” Zareen said.

“Refusing to do what the family wants would only mean they send someone who doesn’t know Asano,” Liara said. “The man we’re going to see has had people like me hovering over him since he became an adventurer. I’ve read his file and seen how that turns out when people like me push him. It’s not a good idea.”

“It seems to be working out for him,” Dara said.

“This is what you think working out looks like?” Zareen asked. “He’s a turtle in his shell, hiding from the many forces that want a slice of him.”

“Yeah, but he's on the big stage, isn't he? We're princesses, and only the protocol servants know who we are.”

“We’re fairly borderline as princesses go, Dara. And having to hide isn’t the only thing this guy has had to deal with.”

“No, it isn’t,” Liara said. “I don’t want any of you to go through what he has, which is why...”

She turned a glare on her husband.

“...I was against any of you coming along and getting involved in this.”

“We want to meet the man who saved our father,” Joseph said.

“I want to meet the man who spend the last two months sitting around in his house, telling the most powerful people in the city to bog off,” Dana said. “I want to be like that.”

“That’s not how I would describe it,” Liara said. “And I don’t want you to share Asano’s experiences. If Carlos Quilido takes months to heal something, that’s something you very much want to avoid happening to you.”

“I’m more interested in the man himself,” Zareen said. “Is it true that his aura is as strong as a gold ranker’s?”

“Yes,” Baseph said. “It’s a little unsettling, if I’m being honest. I felt it being projected out of that house of his, the day of the rescue.”

“Everyone on the island, did,” Liara said. “I felt it from Livaros.”

“It’s very domineering,” Baseph said. “I can see why dominion likes him.”

“The royal family was looking at marrying him in, wasn’t it?” Zareen asked.

“No,” Liara scolded, jabbing a finger at Zareen. “Don’t even think about it.”

“My quiet little town has been a lot less quiet since you arrived,” Pelli told Jason as they sat on a balcony of his pagoda, sharing a pitcher of tropical juice and more magic-infused alcohol than was strictly appropriate for late morning. She was the mayor of Palisaros, the once sleepy little beach town on a lagoon where Jason had settled. She was a member of the royal family but also separate from them, although Jason was unaware of the circumstances.

Jason was being visited by Pelli and Estella Warnock. The trio had struck up something of a friendship when working together to defend Arnote from loose monsters during the Builder’s attack on Rimaros. With the adventurers busy going to war, the three had needed to step in, since the monster surge didn’t care what people were doing and just kept producing monsters.

Contrary to what Carlos may have thought, it was they and not he who were Jason’s most frequent visitors over the course of his convalescence. Estella Warnock had moved into her grandfather’s house, not far from Jason’s, and was beholden to no organisations. With Pelli acting as a shield for her, she had managed to remain that way, even with people now paying her close attention as she went in and out of the pagoda.

“I’m genuinely sorry about what’s happened here,” Jason told Pelli. “I was looking for a nice, quiet time. I always suspected things might get a little boisterous for me, but I never expected it to be this much or this fast.”

“It has been good for local business,” Pelli acknowledged. “All the rental homes have been booked out by people here to watch you for one organisation or another. Two new cafés have opened.”

“And are you the one watching me for the royals?”

“I took myself away from all that nonsense for a reason,” Pelli said. “I don’t want to end up with some upstart rescuing my husband only to turn around and threaten him.”

“I’m not threatening anyone’s husband – which you don’t have, by the way. I’m just using Liara to set a tone for future interactions. I need to show that I won’t be dictated to.”

“You know that the smart move would be to let them dictate away and then just ignore them. Less confrontational.”

“I’ve never been one for the smart move. I don’t think I like what that says about me.”

Pelli chuckled, then looked out over the balcony.

“I’m pretty sure that’s their carriage I can sense heading this way, so I’ll trot off.”

She stood up and Estella did the same.

“I’ll go to,” Estella said, then claimed the pitcher from the small table that held the drinks.

“I’m also taking this.”

“No worries,” Jason said with a chuckle.

Jason got to his feet as Pelli nimbly vaulted the railing, not bothering to leave by the door.

“Asano, I have been contacted by people,” Estella said. “Pelli has been shielding me from strangers, but this is someone I know.”

“And?”

“We should talk about it. But I told them I wouldn’t do anything until you were recovered, so I’ll tell you about it then.”

“Sounds good.”