

Chapter 595

Don't Show Up to The Fancy Party in Shorts

After a lengthy seclusion in his cloud house, still presenting itself as a pagoda, Jason was finally open to meeting with at least some of the people clamouring for his attention. There was no shortage of them, following his series of ostentatious displays, ranging from the opportunistic to the concerned. Not concerned *for* Jason, for the most part, but *about* him.

Of those that were seeking Jason's attention, the better-informed ones had chosen to make use of people Jason would already be open to meeting. This started with Estella Warnock, with whom Jason was sharing lunch on a pagoda balcony that overlooked the island.

Estella was not an adventurer and had no interest in being one. When she had served as a scout to help Jason and other adventurers protect the island from monsters during the Builder's attack on Rimaros, it had not been out of any sense of civic duty. It had been at the behest of her grandfather, a former adventurer who did have the sense of duty that his granddaughter did not share.

Warwick Warnock had been one of Jason's neighbours until he died assaulting one of the Builder's fortress cities at the very same time Jason and Estella were protecting the island. Estella had inherited his home and had been at something of a loss after his death, having just given up her profession of low-stakes spy-for-hire. She had been one of Jason's few allowed visitors during his convalescence, commiserating in a shared sense of aimlessness.

"Havi Estos wants a meeting," she told him.

"Lots of people want to see me. I didn't think you were speaking to him."

Havi Estos was a major middleman for semi-legal activities to whom Jason had been introduced in his early days in Rimaros. In order to learn more about Jason, he had hired Estella to observe him, not expecting her powerful yet discreet perception abilities to be noticed. This was the very job that prompted Estella to give up the work, not being the first job where she got more than she bargained for. Estella had been quite nervous about encountering Jason again until her grandfather smoothed things over.

"He sought me out," Estella said. "He knows I know you and wants to make amends."

"With me or you?"

“Jason, everyone in the city is talking about you, and now he’s very worried about having sent me to spy on you, and what you might do about it. No one is trying to make amends with me.”

“They should. Smart, skilled, discreet people are valuable, and I’m one of those three at best.”

“I’m not going back to work for Estos or anyone like him. They use people like me to catch the trouble they want to avoid.”

“I wouldn’t use you like that.”

She gave him a long stare.

“Are you offering me a job?”

“Do you know the name Emir Bahadir?”

She thought for a moment before answering.

“Is that the guy who tried to rob the royal family a few years back?”

“He did more than try, which is why he’s not allowed back in the Storm Kingdom.”

“Oh, I think they’d let him come.”

Jason laughed.

“Yeah, I imagine they would. Anyway, he’s the one who gave me the cloud flask that produced the building we’re sitting in. When he did, he told me that I should consider expanding my operation. Get some staff, the way he has for his treasure hunting operations.”

“You want to be a treasure hunter?”

“No, but have you ever heard of auxiliary adventurers? They join adventuring teams as non-combat members, providing various specialty services. My group will be doing a lot of travelling soon, and having someone outside the team proper who could get the lay of the land quickly would be valuable to us.”

“You want me to traipse around the world with you and your grab-bag of lunatics who run around with diamond rankers, gods and who knows what else?”

“Yeah, pretty much. I think things will calm down for a while, though.”

“They would have to. I think you’re past the point where things can escalate without the whole world getting destroyed.”

“Been there, done that,” Jason said. “I’m not helping my case here, am I?”

Rick Geller and his team had been in training in the Geller compound in Greenstone at the same time Jason was first training as an adventurer. One of his team members had been amongst the first to be forcibly implanted with a star seed and the attempt to extract it

had been a gruesome and lethal failure. That spot on the team had subsequently been filled by Dustin Kettering.

Dustin had once been part of a three-man team with Neil and Thadwick Mercer. Thadwick's own star seed implantation had caused that group to fracture, with Neil going to Jason's team and Dustin going to Rick's. Thadwick's fate was considerably more tragic, becoming some kind of energy vampire that was still at large somewhere in the world.

Although he was now silver-rank, Rick looked as uncomfortable as ever around high-rankers, being a good and obedient young man. Jason found himself grinning at Rick's uncertain expression as he watched him emerge from a flying carriage with Princess Liara, stepping onto the lawn in front of the pagoda.

Jason vaulted the balcony railing to land right in front of the pagoda's large main entrance. He conjured his cloak as he fell to slow his descent, which wasn't necessary to avoid damage to him, but to avoid dents in the lawn from a superhero landing. The new look of Jason's cloak arrested the attention of Liara and Rick, who were both familiar with its previous iteration.

"That looks creepy," Rick said. "My eyes don't want to look at it. It's wrong, somehow. Like you're wearing a hole in the world."

"It is quite unsettling to look at," Liara agreed. "I not entirely shocked, however, that your stealth ability is so attention-grabbing."

"Why do people keep saying that?" Jason complained as he dismissed the cloak.

"At least you're draping yourself in weird magic instead of weirdly high numbers of women," Rick observed, drawing an odd look from Liara. "When a beautiful princess attached herself to my meeting, I figured it would be the same thing all over again. What is it with you and these Rimaros princesses?"

Liara gave Jason a querying expression.

"Rick was around when I first met Zara. But I am not always surrounded by women, what's about to happen notwithstanding."

The doors behind Jason opened up to reveal a group of women, including the pink-haired Estella, Farrah, Sophie, Belinda and Autumn Leal. Autumn was an adventurer whose acquaintance Jason had made, prior to his team arriving in Rimaros. She had an exotic magical frog named Neil that had perished in the defence of Rimaros from the Builder's flying fortress city. This was something Jason had discovered in the process of checking on people in the wake of the casualty-filled battle, but he had largely left her alone.

Autumn had been in mourning for her bonded companion for some time, but for the first time, Jason sensed at least an amount of hope from her aura, along with a solid sense of resolve. It was not the time to explore that, however, and he satisfied himself that she seemed better than she had in the past.

Rick was oblivious to this as he saw Jason joined by five women.

“And there it is,” he said.

Jason opened a portal to Rimaros and the five women passed through. Jason didn't close it afterwards, and instead called out through the still-open doors.

“Are you coming or what?”

“On my way,” Taika's voice came from inside, shortly followed by a hustling Taika. He looked around, seeing that the five women had already departed, then his gaze settled on Liara. “Oh, hey, princess bro.” He then went through the portal and Jason closed it again.

Liara shook her head.

“A bronze ranker,” she muttered. “What happened to the respect for rank?”

“It's Jason,” Rick told her. “He's a bad influence.”

Rick then remembered that he was speaking to a gold-rank princess and his head dipped down as if yanked by a string, causing Jason to chuckle.

“You'd best come inside,” he told them.

“Sit anywhere,” Jason said as they entered a casual lounge. “I'm not really the conference table type.”

The lounge, like most of the pagoda, was designed in such a way that the room had a flow leading out to an open wall balcony terrace. This particular room was made up of undisguised cloud substance rather than being masked as more ordinary material. The sprawling layout of plush couches and armchairs fell outside of the meeting etiquette that Rick and Liara were familiar with, so while they looked around for the most appropriate place to sit, Jason moved behind the bar.

Taking out a selection of fruit and two magical wands, Jason started waving the wands like a slightly confused orchestra conductor and the fruit rose into the air. After wobbling in place for a moment, the fruit started peeling, slicing, pulping and juicing itself into a pitcher. Liara and Rick gave up on finding appropriate seats for the moment to watch.

“I could be better at this, I know,” he apologised. “It's something I picked up while I was recovering to practise mana control. I know a guy who's way better at this than me, but he probably wouldn't be great at saving the world. We all have our areas.”

He paused, frowning.

“Wow, that was really braggadocious. Am I a braggart? When did I start bragging about things I've actually done instead of making crazy stuff up? Oh yeah; my life caught up with the most ridiculous things I could think of. Damn, I'm great.”

Jason flashed his guests a grin as he resumed moving the wands. He finished the pitcher of blended fruit drink with a bundle of ice cubes that floated in on their own, and then came out from behind the bar, looking at Rick and Liara standing around.

“Couldn't find a seat?”

With a sweep of Jason's arm, all the furniture outside of the bar area sank into the floor. Three chairs then emerged from the floor, spaced equally around a low, circular table. Jason plonked down into one of them and the others sat down after.

“I think you forgot the drinks,” Rick pointed out.

“Crap, thanks.”

Jason reached out with his aura, grabbing the pitcher of juice and three glasses, floating across the room and onto the table. Liara was able to sense the aura he projected to do so and looked at him, wide-eyed.

“I wouldn't worry about it,” Jason told her. “This is pretty much how it always goes. I almost die, come out of it with some weird new power and a god or some other ridiculous thing shows up. The order changes around but it's a pretty reliable pattern.”

He filled the glasses from the pitcher.

“No exciting ingredients, just fruit. Bit early in the day, yeah?”

Jason leaned back in his seat and sipped at his drink, waiting for the others to talk. Rick was waiting on Liara to speak first and Liara was looking around the room.

“Your cloud building has changed,” she said. “I don't mean the shape; that's normal cloud house stuff. I mean whatever is under the surface. It feels different. Focused, somehow. Solid.”

“I made some changes,” Jason acknowledged.

“How bad would it be? If someone came for you here?”

“For me? Not so bad. For them? Depends on who it was.”

Jason's gaze turned to Rick.

“I have to apologise,” he said. “I didn't realise you were still in town. I thought you went back north after the Builder abandoned the Sea of Storms.”

“Didn't Neil tell you?” Rick asked. “He and Dustin have been spending plenty of time together since then.”

“No, he didn't.”

Jason looked to Liara, then back at Rick.

“Let me guess: the Adventure Society roped you in so I'd actually take a meeting, and then Princess Adventure Pants here turned up, right as you were about to set out. The royal family 'convinced' the Adventure Society to let their local representative tag along, given that I've been willing to meet with her before.”

Rick gave Liara a panicked look at ‘Princess Adventure Pants,’ his eyes desperately trying to communicate that he wasn’t responsible for Jason.

“I'm very familiar with Mr Asano's way of conducting himself,” Liara assured him. “And yes, Mr Asano; that is a more or less accurate description.”

She reached forward to take a glass and sipped at it, nodding appreciatively.

“Not bad. But we have to talk about this,” she said, gesturing with her glass.

“We have to talk about the juice?”

“More what the juice represents,” Liara said. “That is the gist of what you were sent to propose, was it not, Mr Geller?”

“Uh, yes,” Rick confirmed. “Basically, Jason, everyone would be more comfortable with your level of prominence going down for the immediate future.”

“Precipitously down,” Liara added.

Jason looked at the juice Liara was holding, his mind ticking over what she had meant. Then a huge grin spread over his face.

“I'm in,” he said.

“We haven't even told you what the Adventure Society is proposing,” Rick said.

“It's a secret identity, isn't it? Jason Asano, scary god-socialiser, leaves his team for parts unknown. Then casual juice enthusiast, Bruce Wayne, joins the team as an auxiliary member in charge of cooking.”

“Something like that,” Liara said. “There will be a lot of details to sort out, but yes: the Adventure Society is proposing the creation of a more discreet legal identity for you to inhabit. You'll need to be more cautious when working with your team, but it should be manageable. You generally won't be observed when you're in the field, fighting monsters. It would help a great deal if your team stayed on the move, taking ordinary contracts.”

“You know that won't hold up to almost any scrutiny from someone who knows enough,” Jason pointed out.

“It's not intended to,” Rick said. “There's no hiding you from anyone of real influence. The idea is just for you to be a lot less loud for a while. Preferably until you rank up, because the higher your rank, the more that the crazy stuff you get caught up in becomes acceptable.”

“I won’t be ranking up for a long time.”

“The Adventure Society is very open to you spending the next decade or five being nice and quiet,” Rick said.

“Fair enough,” Jason said with a chuckle. “So, barbecue-Jason is roaming around with melodrama-Jason’s now-former team. Where is drama-guy while this is going on?”

“He leaves with his ancestral majesty,” Liara said. “With everything he has going on, it’s time for him to go out and see some of the cosmos.”

“Apprenticed to Soramir Rimaros,” Jason said. “Prestigious.”

“Obviously, this will work a lot better if your new identity isn’t the only auxiliary joining your team,” Liara said. “Before she left, your friend Dawn made some arrangements, but we can go over the specifics when we get into the details.”

“The Adventure Society wants you to play up the scary adventurer before you go,” Rick said. “A social event where you will need to be every bit the impressive adventurer, rather than... the other thing.”

“You need to be what people imagine from a man who speaks to gods and great astral beings,” Liara said. “Not the man you actually are when you speak to gods and great astral beings.”

“You got a transcript from the spies floating around then?” Jason asked. “In fairness, you have to talk to Dominion like that or he won’t give you the time of day. Unless you’re a king or something, I guess. Now that I think about it, maybe I should suck up to him. He might leave me alone, then. I should remember to try that.”

Rick was looking at Jason with the wide-eyed expression Jason was starting to think of as the ‘standard Rick.’

“Anyway,” Jason said. “Don’t show up to the fancy party in shorts and sandals, is what you’re saying.”

“That cloak of yours should do the job nicely,” Liara said.

“You want me to wear the cloak to a social event?” Jason asked. “The Adventure Society is looking for me to go full chuuni, I see. I can do that.”

“I don’t know what chuuni means,” Rick said.

“I think we can figure it out from context,” Liara said. “Mr Geller, since Mr Asano has already agreed – if your earlier acceptance wasn’t merely in jest, Mr Asano?”

“I’m still in; I like this idea. And I did ask you to figure out how to reduce my profile, after all.”

“Then let us take ‘yes’ for an answer and go, Mr Geller. Mr Asano, we’ll discuss the details at a later date.”

“No worries,” Jason said.

“I would appreciate it if any public displays you make from here on out are more of the dramatic Jason and less of the neighbourhood barbecue Jason, if you please,” Liara said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” Jason said. “Melodrama is kind of my thing.”

“Yes, Mr Asano. We’ve noticed.”